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BUCKSHOT BEN, The Man-Hunter of Idaho; Or, THE CACTUS CREEK TRAGEDY.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," ETC., ETC.



"DROP THAT REVOLVER, YOU DOG!" CRIED BUCKSHOT BEN, "OR I'LL FIX YOU WORSE THAN YOUR TOOLS OVER YONDER!"

Buckshot Ben, The Man-Hunter of Idaho; OR, THE CACTUS CREEK TRAGEDY.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,
AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "SCORPION
BROTHERS," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY
JAGUAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WAS IT SUICIDE OR MURDER?

"PLACER PETE has shot himself!"

These words ran through the little mining town of Cactus Creek, passing from lip to lip as startling news will, but creating an interest which a simple suicide never causes in great cities.

But the town in question was far from spires and pavements, beyond the pale of civilization—away on the Western plains, where men seldom go except to wrest the golden ore from the baser rock and sand.

Cactus Creek's total population counted but forty souls, all men, and when word went out that one of their number had committed suicide, business was forgotten and all crowded to the cabin of the dead.

He lay on his humble couch as he had been found, for he was past the benefit of friendly effort. His body was utterly cold; he had evidently died during the first half of the night.

There is an awful solemnity and majesty about death, and when the victim of time falls by his own hand, a horror is added, before which the strongest of living men may well grow grave.

Placer Pete was, perhaps, happier at that moment than any of the men who stood above his mortal remains; but the sight of one they had liked in life, thus prostrated, brought sadness to all.

The dead man lay on his back, his position quite natural and easy, except that his right hand grasped a revolver, the muzzle of which rested near his head, where was the fatal wound.

"Wal, his troubles are ended, anyhow," observed Sam Ricketts.

"Steady narves he had, fur he fired so true that death was instantaneous," added Lige Jones. "See how nat'ral his posish is; jest as though he was sleepin'."

"He died easy."

Nearly all agreed in the last opinion, but one man stood above the corpse and made no remarks. His name was Ben Brown, or Buckshot, as he was frequently called, and he was, like all the rest, a miner of Cactus Creek.

Somehow, being an observing man, it struck him that Placer Pete had not died so easy after all. True, his position was an easy one, but on his face was a look the other men seemed to disregard. To Buckshot Brown it seemed like a mingling of anger and defiance—strange expressions for a suicide.

On such a face one would look to see firm resolution, silent despair, or calm confidence, but not anger and defiance.

Their presence at such a time struck Ben Brown as being somewhat singular.

"Had he friends outside the camp?" gently asked the observing man.

Each man looked at his neighbor for an answer. No one seemed to know. Placer Pete, though kind and generous, had always lived by himself, and his private affairs had been kept as secrets.

"What was his real name?" continued the investigator.

Again no one answered. In the little town, the dead man had been known as Placer Pete. Perhaps he had been thus christened; but, be that as it might, no one could say whether he had possessed another name.

Buckshot Ben caressed his beard thoughtfully.

He was a handsome fellow, this keen-eyed miner. In years, he had probably slipped a trifle past thirty, and any one might well envy him his physique. He was of medium size, but a more compact bundle of muscles and hard flesh could not very well be put in the form of man.

He was dressed like the other miners, but he seemed far more intelligent. His language was good, and his face was somewhat refined. Still, it was thoroughly manly, strong of expression, and attractive. His eyes were gray, and they were frank, laughing, penetrating, stern and fierce, according to the mood which moved him.

He wore his hair short, and the lower part of his face was covered with a short, thick, brown beard.

"Well," said he, after a pause, "there is work here for some of us. The body must be prepared for burial, and his pockets, and other baggage—if he has any—examined to see if we can gain a clew to his identity. Maybe he has friends who would like to know of his fate."

"That's a job fur you, Buckshot," said old

Sam Ricketts. "You're an eddicated man, an' now you kin sarve as coroner."

And so Ben Brown chose two assistants, and sent the others outside the cabin.

First of all, they unclasped the dead man's hands from the revolver—a work not wholly easy after the time which had elapsed since the shooting.

The fatal revolver was a ponderous affair of forty-one caliber, but so old that the name of the maker was not distinguishable. Its weight was beyond the average, for, from end to end, it was of metal. No wood entered into its composition, but the sides of the breech were of a rough, dark-colored substance which, from age and accumulated rust, Brown was not able to name at first. It might be bone, or brass, or even iron.

He gazed at the fatal thing with interest. From tip to tip it was stained to a dark red by the blood of Placer Pete, and along the rough sides this sanguinary color was especially marked; the grater-like surface having caught and held the life-fluid.

Buckshot Ben laid it carefully aside, and turned again to the dead man. He took the revolver-hand to bring it down in place on the breast, but suddenly paused, and stared at the hand as though he had seen a ghost. It was more delicate and less bronzed than is common among gold-diggers; but it was not that which interested Brown.

What struck him as being peculiar was the fact that, although the revolver was coated with blood, the hand which had grasped it was free from all stain.

Ben sat still, trying to think how the blood could run back the whole length of the revolver and in such quantity as to saturate it, and still leave the hand white as usual.

He raised the revolver again, and looked at it sharply. Experienced in such matters, he was soon ready to swear that the stain of blood had not been there more than ten hours.

He was growing interested; but he laid it aside without comment.

Their work went on, and two more discoveries were made. It was found that the fatal bullet had passed nearly through Pete's head, lodging close to the skin; so they acted the part of surgeons, and removed it.

Though somewhat flattened, there could be no reasonable doubt but that it had come from the old revolver.

The second discovery was a letter in the dead man's pocket. This was examined with interest.

The envelope bore the postmark of Denver, Colorado, and was addressed to "John Marble, Shaker Gulch, Idaho." It had been previously opened, and Buckshot Ben was soon reading the letter it contained.

It was as follows:

"When the hawk is abroad, the dove seeks its nest. Mother Earth is the safest of beds, and the deeper the burrow, the safer the sleeper. The wolves are on the war-path, but they have found no trail. Cover your tracks. 'Dead men tell no tales.'"

"EAGLE EYE."

This remarkable document was read by the three men together, and the comments of the assistants of Ben Brown were natural.

"Wal, darn my boots ef that ain't a crazy epistle," said one.

"Ef Placer Pete writ that, he was sartinly excusable fur shootin' hisself. No sane man would write sech stuff," added the other.

Ben Brown said nothing. Peculiar as was the letter, and senseless as it at first glance seemed, he, with his suspicious still in mind, saw cunning in every sentence. Whoever had written it had conveyed important information thereby, and the letter meant a good deal more than at first appeared.

But, why was this letter, mailed at Denver, and addressed to "John Marble," at Shaker Gulch, in the possession of Placer Pete? The postmark was not distinct, and he could not tell the month, or day thereof; but the year was the same as that in which Pete had died.

Yet, Placer Pete had not been absent from Cactus Creek a day since he first arrived there, fourteen months before.

Saying nothing, Buckshot Brown soon thrust the mysterious document into his pocket, the three finished their work of preparing the body for burial, and then Ben's companions went away and left him alone with the dead.

He at once arose and looked the cabin carefully over, searching the ground as an Indian looks for a forest trail.

At last he went to the rude couch and stood looking down at the still, white features. His mind was busy, and he unconsciously uttered his thoughts aloud.

"Placer Pete, you did not die the death of a suicide. Instead, murder was abroad last night and by the hand of an assassin your life went out. Who killed you, or why the deed was done, I do not know, but I am driven by circumstances to think that there is a dark plot somewhere. I hereby pledge myself to do my utmost to solve this mystery. There is little in the way of clew, I fear, but chance is often a great helper. What I can do shall be done."

He spoke the words without a gesture. Quiet,

calm and easy as though the matter was an unimportant one, he made his pledge. There was no extravagant oath, no dramatic motions, no pompous self-confidence.

Such was not the way of Buckshot Brown.

A peculiar man, was this quiet gentleman of the Far West. He was as well versed in books as in the lore of the mountains and plains, a dead shot with rifle and revolver, a fine swordsman, an adept at boxing and wrestling, and a lion in courage.

He was a veteran in spite of his comparative youth, and, though naturally cool and quiet, those who had seen him when aroused were ready to swear he was a "bad man" when pushed to the wall.

Placer Pete was buried just outside the camp, and that evening Ben Brown sat in his hut and studied his position, smoking in the mean time to aid his mental labor.

"This man, whom we only know as Placer Pete, was in somebody's way. Perhaps he held an important secret. His enemies arrived on the scene and killed him, doing the work outside the village, and afterward bearing the body on a blanket to the cabin, where they fixed him in the position of a suicide, revolver in hand, to fool us."

"I know he was killed outside the village because the bed did not show one-tenth part of the blood he must have shed, and, moreover, there was no sign of a struggle in his hut; whereas, I know he fought hard. He knew his life was menaced, for he had a look of anger and defiance which froze on his face in death. Again, there were marks of strong fingers on his neck; and, still again, the blood which stained the revolver had partially dried before his hand was clasped around it. The hand was not stained."

"I believe the body was brought in on a blanket, because I could find no sign of blood outside the hut. Had he been carried in an ordinary way, his blood would have dripped to the stony ground and left a trail I could have followed."

"Next, the assassins were men and they wore moccasins. Only a man could have so compressed his throat, and boots would have left a trail."

"Now, then, comes a mystery. Why was it desired that we should think he killed himself? Why didn't the assassins leave his body where he was killed, or throw it into a canyon to be forever concealed? I can see that it is because there is a deep plot somewhere, but I fail to see the move, as yet."

"Next, how about this letter? It is strange and erratic, but it has a meaning. 'Dead men tell no tales.' That, in particular, is very suggestive, and, I dare say, refers to Placer Pete's taking off."

"'Earth is the softest of beds.' Does that refer to Pete's destination? 'Cover your tracks.' Humph! the assassins covered their trail. Possibly this letter refers to the crime of which I know, but I believe it refers solely to that of which I know nothing."

"Now, who are John Marble and 'Eagle Eye,' and how came this letter in Pete's possession? I know he has not been in Idaho for a year, so he could not have been in Shaker Gulch to take this letter from the office. The supposition is that some one, possibly John Marble, sent it to him in some way. And yet, maybe not."

"Next, whoever opened this letter made use, of scissors which shows that it was either a woman or a man of some refinement. The ordinary man tears open his letter with his fingers. Some use their knife. This was not opened with a knife, for the end is smoothly cut, and a knife leaves a ragged edge."

"I'll wager something this was cut open in a private room, or sitting-room, by a woman. Or, just as a man was about to tear it with his clumsy fingers, a female companion may have said, 'Here! take the scissors.'"

"At any rate, I'm pretty sure there is a woman in the case; not because it's fashionable to accuse the sex, but because of this letter business. I'll discover the whole mystery if I can. In a day or two, I'll bid good-by to Arizona and journey to Shaker Gulch, Idaho. Perhaps I may meet John Marble!"

CHAPTER II.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

BUCKSHOT BROWN journeyed to Idaho as he had planned and soon found himself in Shaker Gulch. The move was not a Quixotic one. He had for some time previous to the death of Placer Pete been thinking of changing his base, and the event barely hastened his going toward the north; while it had the effect of settling his exact destination.

He would locate at Shaker Gulch, take a period of ease, look around for "John Marble," and then, whether he found him or not, settle down to work.

Once there, he found the usual varied population which is sure to come to a thriving mining town. There were good, bad and indifferent, and Ben Brown, in his quiet way, took notice of all.

At the end of a week, he had learned one

thing which he was sure was authentic. No such man as John Marble lived in the place, nor had there been such a resident. He who had received the letter thus addressed, had either used a fictitious name or had been but a transient pilgrim.

In gaining this information, Ben had asked questions of but one man. He had made the acquaintance of one Ned Barton, superintendent of the Bonanza mine, and, finding him an honest young fellow, had revealed his ruling passion to the extent of asking that one question.

"This boom is a slender one," thought Ben, as he stood one morning on the steps of the American Hotel, "but the patient fisher gets the trout. I think I'll run over and see the postmaster this morning."

Accordingly, he sauntered toward the place he had named, quietly smoking a cigar. That he had not already seen the guardian of the mails was owing to the fact that the latter had been ill, but Brown believed it time for him to be out.

He had not gone many yards when he saw another pedestrian approaching him. The latter was a young man who seemed to be hovering on the bridge between boyhood and manhood. His age was somewhere from eighteen to twenty years, and he united a very slender body with a sharp, precocious face.

Buckshot had frequently seen this youth around the post-office, so he now paused and addressed him.

"What's your hurry, young man?" he asked.

The youth did not show by even a turning of his eyes that he heard the question, but when Brown put out his hand he stopped.

"Do you work for Seba Williston?" asked the miner.

The only reply was a shake of the head, and a most peculiar head it was. Long, straight, Indian-like hair framed it in a half circle, keen, black eyes looked out from deep recesses, and not a sign of beard was on his dark face; the face of a half-breed.

The one idea which would first assail a stranger was that this was a remarkably sharp young man.

"You don't?" continued Ben. "Well, I was under the impression you did. I've seen you around the post-office a good deal. Do you know anything about Williston?"

The youth raised both hands and his long, slender fingers began to move rapidly, crossing and recrossing in a peculiar way.

"What's that?" asked the miner. "Deaf and dumb alphabet on a new system? Maybe you have a cramp or St. Vitus's dance. If so, speak out; don't be bashful. There's no danger; not a hair."

But the young man, having formed his spider's web, touched his ears and mouth and went his way.

Brown looked after him thoughtfully, stroking his brown beard with one hand.

"Well, here's a citizen of caliber not easily found out. He is as sharp as a needle, if I am any judge, but he seems to have drawbacks. I reckon he was giving me the mute alphabet in Greek. He was too deep for me, anyhow—just a hair!"

Thinking thus, he watched the boy until he turned from the main street, and then resumed his way to the post-office.

This establishment had originally been located in the same building with the American Hotel, but when Seba Williston, a man of reputed wealth and leisure, settled at the gulch and built a fine house, he was created postmaster and the office located on his own premises.

Ben Brown reached the place and walked in, and, as usual, he found Williston's daughter, Ida, on duty. She was a pretty girl, with rippling black hair, black eyes, regular features and a fine form, and, at all times her manner was very ladylike.

The man from Arizona, reading her well, had thought at first sight that she ought to be in a place of more importance than Shaker Gulch, for she had undeniable genius, but the latent firmness expressed on her face told that she was not one to shrink back from the occasional troubles of mining life.

"Good-morning," said the visitor, nodding.

"Is there a letter for Ben Brown to-day?"

"Not even a postal card," the girl answered, with a smile.

"I reckon my friends have all thrown me over. They can't be depended on in a norther, friends can't. By the way, I've never seen Mr. Williston here in the office yet."

"He has been indisposed for a week or more."

"When he is well, I suppose he is here more than you are."

"Oh! yes, I seldom come into the office."

"Well, I'd like to see your father if I can. I have a little business with him. Do you think it can be arranged?"

"Oh! yes, easily. He is not too ill to see callers. Just walk up the stairs beyond that door and knock at the first door on the next floor."

Brown expressed his thanks and proceeded to do as he was directed.

He had decided to see the Gulch postmaster and ask if he remembered a letter addressed to

John Marble, all of which seemed perfectly proper.

So up the stairs went the amateur detective, and when his knock had brought forth an invitation to enter, he pushed open the door and entered a good-sized, pleasant room.

At the further side a man sat reading a book, a portly, well-dressed, rather impressive-looking man of middle age, with a heavy beard, a firm face and large, keen eyes.

One glance was enough to show Ben Brown that he was no ordinary man, but magnificence had little effect on him, and he calmly advanced.

"I beg your pardon for intruding on you, but I am a new citizen of the Gulch and I called for a little information."

"You are quite welcome, my dear sir," answered the postmaster, in a deep voice. "I'm always ready to give information, and in my present illness, the sight of a guest is pleasant. Sit down, sir, sit down."

Mr. Williston had arisen, and, while he talked, placed two chairs.

He was cordial without being too friendly, and Ben was rather favorably impressed, but, with a habit of observation born of long experience in wild life, he wondered whether it was accident or design that Mr. Williston had so placed the chairs that his visitor's face would be in the light and his own in shadow.

Finding him inclined to be sociable, Ben sat down and talked about Shaker Gulch, in general, before he wound around to his subject, and the postmaster gave a good deal of information. It was an excellent place to settle in, he said.

While they talked, the impression grew upon Ben Brown that that was not their first meeting.

The face and form of Mr. Williston were not familiar, but often a tone or gesture seemed to recall some half-forgotten page of the past.

"Have I really met him before?" the miner was wondering.

He did not succeed in answering the question to his satisfaction, but finally he approached the subject which had taken him to the postmaster's presence.

"Do you remember a man named John Marble who was in this town some weeks ago?" he asked, carelessly, but with his gaze fixed squarely on Williston's face.

"No," the latter answered promptly. "What was his business?"

"I hardly think he stopped long enough to have any. As near as I can get to the facts of the case, he was here but a short time. You see there is a small fortune awaiting him in the East, and whoever finds him gets a reward. I want that reward. Don't you remember having any mail for him? I have found a man who says he addressed a letter to him at this office, so I suppose you handled it."

The miner still spoke carelessly, but he was merely hiding his hand from his companion.

"I have no recollection of such a letter," said Williston, with seeming sincerity. "It is possible that there may have been one, however. Men frequently stop here for a few days and receive mail, but their faces and their names soon die out of my recollection."

All this was true, and, after talking for some time longer, Brown decided that there was nothing to be learned from that source; he must seek further for tidings of John Marble.

The matter gradually became overweighted by another, and again and again he asked himself where he had seen Williston before.

Many men would have sought an answer from the postmaster himself, but it was not Ben's way.

In seeking for light, he might give more than he gained.

Anxious to see the man's face fairly in the light, however, he drew back several paces on arising, making a show of buttoning his coat in the meantime, and, as a result, Williston thoughtlessly advanced into the light.

Lucky it was for Buckshot Brown then that he was in the shadow, for despite his coolness, he changed expression perceptibly. He had recognized the postmaster.

CHAPTER III.

A SECRET UNTOLD.

LUCKILY for Buckshot Ben, the postmaster was at that moment delivering an oration on the present and future of Shaker Gulch, so he did not notice the brief surprise on the miner's face.

Another moment and the latter was as calm as ever, for it was seldom he lost his self-control, and he faced Seba Williston without a sign to betray that he was inwardly thinking:

"That man here! Now, by my life, I have struck a rich lead in coming to Idaho. I may have more than one man-hunt on my hands. This fellow evidently don't recognize me, but I'll introduce myself some day."

All this he kept to himself, and Seba little suspected the emotion that was in his mind. They wound up their interview in orthodox style, and then Buckshot Ben said good day and started down the stairs.

Williston looked after him with a thoughtful frown.

"Now, then, who is this fellow and why did

he come to see me? His real object did not appear on the surface. I can swear to that, and, by Jupiter, I half believe—"

He paused, ran his hand into his jacket, where it touched a revolver, and then added:

"Can it be that suspicion has been aroused and that he is a spy?"

Little trace of weakness the postmaster showed at that moment. His tall, powerful form was erect, and his great eyes glittered ominously. He took one step toward where hung his hat and then turned back, as though impressed by a new idea, opened the door and crept softly down the stairs.

A smile crossed his face as he did so—a smile which reminded one of the disclosing of a tiger's teeth—and he muttered:

"They are there! I suspected as much. Now, let me see if they are in league. If that girl has dared—"

He did not finish the sentence, but paused with his ears near the keyhole. Ben Brown had stopped in the office and was talking with Ida.

"Have you lived long in Shaker Gulch?" were the first words the listener overheard, and these in the voice of his late visitor.

"It is about a year now since we settled here," Ida answered.

"Your father hasn't a very confining business, or, rather, it isn't one which keeps a person very busy in a town of this size."

"Oh! it's only in name, that's all. Mr. Williston has retired from business, and this little responsibility serves to occupy his attention somewhat, you know."

"Mr. Williston? Isn't he your father?" Ben asked.

"Why, certainly. Why do you ask the question?" and Ida seemed surprised.

"Only because it struck me as being a little odd that you should refer to your father as Mr. Williston? It's nothing, of course."

The eavesdropper could not see through the door, so he had no means of knowing that Ben Brown was looking sharply at Miss Williston.

"I see nothing peculiar about it," she retorted, in a voice far from pleasant. "You must remember that you are a stranger, which makes my way of speaking perfectly correct."

"Of course, miss, of course," Buckshot replied, amiably. "I didn't mean any harm, I assure you."

The apology served to mollify Ida, and they talked for several minutes about trivial matters. Ben, however, was but biding his time, and, finally, he so directed his conversation as to give the girl a chance to state from whence they came before settling in Shaker Gulch.

The attempt was a failure; she evaded the trap, and, as though resolved to betray nothing, politely said that she had work to attend to and turned away from him.

Brown went out and sauntered toward his hotel in a thoughtful mood.

"Well, upon my word, this is an eventful day, after all. I reckon my exodus won't be barren of interest, as I feared. Now, then, I would like to know what El Cuchillo, ex-road-agent of southern California, is doing here in Idaho. He is disguised, physically and morally. I flatter myself I have tolerably keen eyes, but I failed to recognize him at once. Now, then, after devoting six months entire to a fruitless search, I stumble on my man by mere accident. Very good; one of us must step off this earthly footstool. I said it two years ago; I repeat it now."

With Ben Brown this resolution meant a good deal. Against El Cuchillo, the road-robber, he had a hatred which only death could end, and though he found him in a new role, he meant to bring him to judgment.

Only one thing had averted the tragedy when they stood together in that lonely room; it had flashed upon Ben Brown that the man might be playing a deep game in Shaker Gulch, and he wanted to give him all possible rope while he looked for his secret.

"But this girl—what of her? I never knew that El Cuchillo had a daughter when he used to take purses and cut throats down at Santa Barbara. I don't believe the fair Ida is his daughter, and the quickness with which she pounced on me for dropping a suspicion goes to prove my theory. Well, if she is not his daughter, why is she with him? If I read her aright she is as square and upright as he is villainous. Such being the case, why does she follow his lead? That is what I must find out."

He glanced back toward the post-office, and grew freshly interested as he saw the black-haired youth before mentioned walking several rods in his rear. The youth seemed to be unconscious of Ben's proximity, and his whole manner was very innocent, but it at once flashed upon the miner that he was being dogged. The half-breed was sly, but he was not innocent.

In order to inform himself more fully about the youth, he had led Ida to speak of him, and he now knew that the boy was both deaf and dumb, though he went by the name of "Deaf Dan." He was the postmaster's man of all-work, though Ben had judged he was no favorite with Ida.

Only one look did Ben take, and then, resolved to test the matter, he deviated from his

course, and took a short stroll among the hills before going to his hotel.

His little experiment settled the whole matter; wherever he went Deaf Dan followed, though in so skillful a way that, had Ben not seen him in the street, he would not have suspected that he was under espionage.

Having reached the American, he went inside, and the mute soon disappeared.

"Now, then, here is a new shadow on the wall. Why is Deaf Dan bounding me? Clearly to see where I roost; but did he do it on his own hook or was he sent by Williston? If the latter, my disguised gentleman suspects something. Did he recognize me? No, I don't believe he did, but he is as sharp as a needle, and suspected I called on him with an object. He is guilty, or he would not be suspicious. Now, is he afraid of having the old life raked up, or has he new rascality under way? I must find out. Ben Brown, you are getting into a new complication—look out that you don't get in over your boots."

Leaving him, let us now return to the post-office. Ben Brown had scarcely taken his shadow away from the entrance when Seba Williston opened the door at the foot of the stairs and appeared to Ida's view.

Instead of addressing her, he opened another door, and saw Deaf Dan curled up in a chair.

Their eyes met, and then Williston's fingers began to move rapidly. Over and under each other they went, lightning-like, and it was evident he was talking with the mute. It was not the ordinary deaf and dumb alphabet he was using, however, and Ida gained no clew to what he was saying.

Deaf Dan watched the whirling fingers with keen eyes but unchanging features; Ida watched the face of the postmaster with a hovering storm in her dark eyes.

Only a minute did the silence last, and then Dan glided from the office and took to Ben's trail.

The gazes of putative father and daughter met.

"You have played the eavesdropper," said the latter, with subdued anger.

"What do you mean?" Williston asked, with assumed surprise.

"Just what I say. No sooner had that miner passed the outer door than you entered by another. You had been crouching beside it, listening to what we said."

A deeper color had crept into her cheeks and her dark eyes sparkled in a way Seba could not misunderstand.

"You and the fellow seem to be good friends," he observed, with a sneer.

"Bah! I never saw him but once before today. I know nothing whatever about him, but I don't admire your habit of spying and listening."

"My dear girl, don't be so fast. I'll swear to you that I had good reasons for what I did. The idea crept into my head, while this fellow was alone with me, that he was playing a double game. Why I thought so I can't say, unless it all came of his look and ways. He is no common man, I do believe. Well, when he went away, it occurred to me he might stop and talk with you. That is why I have played the listener. What was the result? Why, I heard the fellow try to make you talk of our past. Isn't that so?"

Ida's look changed. Her color of face lessened and she looked startled.

"Do you suppose he was actuated by more than idle curiosity?" she asked.

"My fears tell me, yes."

The girl caught at the counter and seemed to struggle against dizziness. In her own life there had been no sin, yet the shadow of the law had for her a great terror. It might seize upon her companion, and if he fell he would drag her to ruin.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WARNING.

Williston moved forward to offer his arm, but Ida waved him back.

"Let me alone," she said. "From appearances, I should say the time is coming when I must be more than a weak girl. Well, you suspect this man—this Ben Brown—is on your trail. Why? What particular crime in your red past can he be interested in?"

"Hush! Softly and slowly, my dear—"

She made a gesture of disgust.

"Come, sir," she interrupted, "let us deal with each other on a footing of fact. Before the world, we may remain father and daughter for a time, but in privacy, lay down the mask. I object to terms of endearment, which are so shallow in this case. Well, proceed."

"You are wonderfully sensitive," said Williston, with a scowl. "You forget that you are depending on me for a certain secret."

"I forget nothing—not even the fact that every day strengthens my suspicion that you lack the ability or will to deal fairly with me. Seba Williston, I doubt you."

Her momentary weakness had passed and she stood erect and accusing, her eyes searching his face as though to read his thoughts; but, un-

luckily for her, she had to deal with one even wiser and shrewder than herself.

He looked surprised and hurt.

"Really, now, I did not expect this," he said. "Wherein have I proved faithless to you? Do you expect a miracle? I tell you it is not easy to find a missing man in so vast an extent of country as stretches from the Mississippi to the Pacific. I have faithfully promised you that Egbert Hadley shall be found, if possible, and I intend to keep my word. In the meanwhile, you are my guest, and the hospitality of my house is as free to you as myself."

"Why is it so? I have often asked myself this question, but I cannot see. In what way do you gain from my presence? Stop!—hear me through. That you are a gainer, I can not doubt, for you are not a man to make sacrifices. In some way I am useful to you, but how? I cannot see that I am aiding you in any way, so I can only conclude that, by and by, you will offer me up as a sacrifice, *a la Abraham*."

Williston shrugged his shoulders.

"In heaven's name, give me a chance," he said. "You wrong me, Ida, and all because of my past. I tell you I have turned over a new leaf, and when I agreed to find Egbert Hadley for you, it was out of the purest of motives; it was the first step in my life of repentance."

She laughed mockingly.

"Your idea of repentance is a novel one, I must say. If you ever repent, you will give up the gold that is the spoils of long years of crime, instead of hoarding it as you are doing."

"Well, we will let that pass. As for Egbert Hadley, I've promised to find him, and I'll do it if such a thing be possible. I'll swear it! This Ben Brown worries me, however, as I'll confess, though I don't know who or what he is."

Just then Deaf Dan returned, and his nimble fingers crossed and re-crossed for two or three minutes, while Williston watched in silence.

Ida also watched, vexed that she could not understand this telegraphing. Two finger alphabets were known to the deaf-mute; one, the ordinary system, by means of which Ida could converse with him; and the other a fashion invented by Seba and known only to his follower and himself.

Thus, the two could converse in any society and be unintelligible to all save themselves.

What Dan now told seemed satisfactory to his master, for the latter nodded, turned away and went back to his up-stairs lair, while the youth went into his own den.

Ida, thus left alone, dropped into a chair with a look of utter misery on her face.

"In heaven's name, where will this thing end?" she murmured. "I despise myself every hour I am beneath this roof, and yet I can not break away. I am like a boat on the ocean at the mercy of the waves. I must remain until—until—when? Heaven knows, I do not. It may be I shall triumph in the end, or, perhaps, these monsters will some night stab me to the heart. It would be like them!"

A step at the door aroused her and she looked up to see a handsome young man who had walked in, rifle in hand. He was scrupulously neat, and clean shaven, except for a heavy mustache, and his looks somehow gave the impression that he was not a veteran in the West.

Yet, he looked bold and manly, and there was the unmistakable air of a gentleman in the way in which he saluted Ida.

"Good-evening, Miss Williston," he said, "I see you are at your post, as usual. Do you never leave it?"

"I am seldom here when my father is well," she said, being careful this time to give the postmaster the name supposed to be due him from her. "When I have the chance, I am as much of an outdoor rover as yourself."

"There is real pleasure in roving among these mountains," he said, mechanically taking the letter she had extended without any asking.

"Are they really equal to the East?" she asked, with a smile.

"Equal? Well, now, I'm not going to go back on my native soil in any way, but I'll say your town can't be excelled by any on the globe."

"In that case, I expect to hear that you have purchased a mine and settled here to stay."

"Perhaps I will," he answered, seriously.

The conversation was continued for a short time longer, and then the young man shouldered his rifle and made his way toward the American Hotel.

His name was Hubert Lowell, and he was a native of the Eastern States who was traveling over the West for pleasure and information, but, such being the case, the reader may think it a trifle singular that he was spending more time in Shaker Gulch than he had done at Boise City, Portland or San Francisco.

We say *may* think it strange, for the reader is liable to at once suspect that the fair face of Ida Williston had much to do with keeping him there.

He entered the hotel, nodded to Ben Brown and two or three other men who were sitting in the common room, and then passed on to his apartment.

Once there, he laid aside his weapons and

proceeded to read his letter. It was important to him but of no interest to the reader, so we need not give it here.

Having completed this part of his work, he sat down by the window to smoke and reflect. Strange how the blue cloud of tobacco will help a man in his meditations! Beneath the soothing effects of the "weed," one seems to find a second mind to help his own.

Hubert Lowell was in the condition when all men think; they cannot help it. He had met Ida Williston and succumbed to her face and eyes, and her charming way.

In no other way had he been assailed; she had not led him on; he could not even tell whether she cared for him. Yet, he, the graduate of an Eastern college, felt that he had found his fate in this mountain town.

After half an hour of smoking, he arose and began moving about the room, and this brought him to a letter which lay upon his table.

He lifted and examined it curiously. The envelope was perfectly fresh, without postmark or any address except the simple, "H. Lowell," in a masculine hand, which was pencil-written across the face.

Considerably surprised, he tore it open and read the note it contained, and then his surprise increased.

This was what he read:

"HUBERT LOWELL:—If you will take the advice of a friend, you will get out of Shaker Gulch as soon as is possible. Rightfully or wrongfully, suspicion has been directed against you as a sharper and bank-robber, and once in prison, a stranger in a strange land, you may find it hard to prove your innocence. You are, of course, your own master, but friendly advice is never to be despised. A. B. C."

This remarkable communication was read through in silent amazement, and even when the last word was perused, Lowell sat staring blankly at the wall.

Suspected of being a "sharper and bank-robber!" Good heavens! to what a pass had he come—he, who, in his native place, had never had a whisper raised against his good name.

"Suspected— Well, by George!"

He broke off and read the note again. There could be no doubt about it; he had read aright; he had been warned of a danger which ought only to menace the guilty and wicked.

"What the dickens does it mean? What have I done to create such a suspicion? Well, very likely it is because I have done *nothing*. I have loafed around Shaker Gulch for three weeks without doing a stroke of work, and I suppose these honest people believe that every other honest man ought to bend his back to some sort of work. I don't, so I am marked as a thief."

CHAPTER V.

BUCKSHOT BROWN'S DISCOVERY.

WHILE Lowell was still holding the letter, he heard steps outside the door, and, looking through the opening, for it had been left ajar, he saw Ben Brown.

The discovery pleased him, and he at once resolved to take the miner into his confidence. They had been on good terms ever since Buckshot came to the hotel, and he believed him to be an honest, shrewd man.

Consequently, he invited him into the room, closed the door and then confronted him somewhat excitedly.

"What the dickens do you suppose I've got here?" he asked.

"Well, if I was to hazard a guess, I should say it was a piece of paper," Ben calmly remarked.

"Very true, but I referred to the writing upon it, rather than the document itself. Do I look like a desperado or sneak-thief?"

"A little—just a hair!" was the unconsoling reply.

"Maybe, you are right, for I have been notified that I am marked by the authorities. Read that!"

Buckshot Ben received the paper and calmly held it to the fading light of the day.

Up to this time he had not taken any particular interest in the letter, for such things are common all through the United States, but as his eyes rested upon the scholarly writing before him, he started slightly.

Unless his eyes greatly deceived him, he had seen that handwriting before—the penmanship was exactly the same as that in the letter found upon the body of Placer Pete!

Many a veteran detective would have betrayed joy at that moment, but, after the slight start, Ben Brown gave no sign and his placid face was exactly as usual.

Internally, he was thinking busily, he was scanning each letter carefully, and as each one examined proved satisfactory, a triumphant conviction flashed through his mind.

"I am on the track!"

Ay, there was no doubt about it in his own mind; the "A. B. C." of the present note was identical with the "Eagle Eye" of that written to "John Marble" and found on Placer Pete's body.

He stared so long that impatience overcame all else in Lowell's mind.

"Can't you read?" he demanded.

"A little—just a hair," Brown composedly answered, as he lowered the letter. "Where did you get this testament?"

Hubert briefly described what had gone before.

"What do you think of it?" he then asked.

"I think somebody has waded in over his boots."

"Well, who is it, and what is he driving at?"

"If I was to hazard a guess, I should say he was driving at you. Do you take any stock in this hash?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know what to make of it."

"Well, young man, I'll endeavor to enlighten you. That note has got the word 'liar' written all over it. Maybe you don't observe it, but it's there. Don't you worry about officers; you may find 'em your best friends before long. That epistle was the work of an enemy."

"I haven't one in the world!" declared Lowell.

"No! Well, now, I'll bet something you have. Let me tell you that you are in somebody's way. There are two great reasons for hatred in this world—money and women. In the present case, since you are so far from home, we may dismiss the former reason. You have been paying attentions to a girl who has another lover."

Lowell started and then looked thoughtful, while Buckshot Ben sat down by the window, lighted his pipe and awaited for him to speak.

At the end of five minutes his patience was rewarded.

"Mr. Brown," said Lowell, "I feel the need of a little help, or, rather, advice, in this case. I am a 'tenderfoot,' as they see fit to call me; you are a veteran. Will you say what I had better do?"

"There are two courses—stay or run."

"I won't run!" declared Lowell, hotly.

"Right, pard, right. Stick to your grip. Don't run a hair. Well, now, since I am a man of leisure just at present, I'll join forces with you, if you wish, and we'll find the author of this letter. It will be pleasant exercise for us, and he may yet find he has waded in over his boots."

Lowell caught at the idea and the partnership was formed, a union of heads and hands which Ben Brown was as anxious to cement as was the Eastern man. He felt sure that he had obtained a clew toward solving the mystery of the red revolver, of the death of Placer Pete, though there was a chance for numerous doubts.

Perhaps, after all, that letter from "Eagle Eye" had nothing to do with the death of Placer Pete. Ben had never been able to decide how the letter came in the dead man's pocket, from which every other scrap of paper had been taken. Was he on a false clew—

"Well, what are we to do?" Lowell asked.

The miner aroused from his abstraction and a business-like look settled on his face.

"The first thing is to find how this letter came to your table. It is not postmarked, so it did not come through the mail. Some one in Shaker Gulch wrote it, and as letters can't walk around on legs like grasshoppers, it follows that human hands placed it on the table. The writer was a man, and, probably, one of a genteel profession, or no profession at all."

"You judge by the writing, I suppose?"

"No; that merely shows education. My rule is one which is not infallible, though it is pretty correct. Did you ever see a laboring man seal a letter without soiling a great streak on the back of the envelope with his thumb and finger?"

"They are in that habit," Lowell acknowledged.

"Well, now go out and ask the clerk and other parties if they know anything about the letter."

Lowell went, but at the end of ten minutes returned unsuccessful.

"I expected as much. Now, your letter fell into place in one of two ways. Either some dweller in the hotel placed it here, or an outsider entered by means of the window—either of which is easy. In the morning we will look for signs outside, but we will first pay attention to the guests."

"Surely they would not warn me away."

"They are, besides ourselves, six in number, Parsons and Merritt, the St. Louis speculators; Royden, Denver banker; Jones, traveler; and the Misses Mabel Stone and Sibyl Roswell. Which one of the men admires the girl you admire?"

Thus bluntly questioned, Lowell gave a few statistics. He admitted his fancy for the society of Ida Williston, and he said that the girl and her father were in the habit of visiting at the hotel. Who they came to see he did not know, but they made friends with all.

"So Williston is a sociable man?" Ben asked.

"Yes, and a general favorite; but, somehow, I don't like him."

"But which one of the men is devoted to Ida?"

"All of them pay her attentions, but no one has shown a marked preference for her society."

"Well, after supper you will announce to our fellow-boarders that you have decided to leave Shaker Gulch."

"To leave the Gulch?"

"Yes."

"With what object?"

"Simply so that I can observe them. If I see a man that looks particularly pleased at the announcement, he will be a marked man from that out. Of course you will not mention this letter, nor will you leave town. To-morrow you will say that you have a letter which decides you to remain a while longer."

Lowell agreed to the plan, though he had little hope of anything coming of it.

In thus thinking, he was right, as Buckshot Ben freely admitted when they went out together, a little later, for an evening stroll.

"If our man was then present," said the miner, "he is a deep one. None of 'em turned a hair."

"Well, what are we to do next?"

"That remains to be seen. We may have to take some little time to accomplish the work. If it was the fashion in Shaker Gulch to flourish autograph albums, we might take that way to secure specimens of people's handwriting, but the luxury has never struck here. Don't be in a hurry; the world wasn't made in a day."

"And I can depend on you?"

"I'm going in to the tops of my boots, and we are bound to win in the long run."

Talking thus, they wandered beyond the village and to the rock-covered hills. It was a wild and gloomy place, with a profusion of canyons and cliffs, and never anything but somber. Trees and grass did not flourish around Shaker Gulch, and only for the gold the town would never have existed.

The two men paused after going a short distance, sat down on a boulder, and fell into thought.

Buckshot Ben had much upon his mind. His man-hunt was assuming large proportions. He stood committed to find the murderers of Placer Pete, to help Hubert Lowell in his battle, and to engineer his own case against Seba Williston.

If the miner had been a loud-mouthed desperado, he would have at once shot the postmaster and then proclaimed him as El Cuchillo. Ben Brown preferred to do otherwise. He felt sure that the ex-road-agent had some new villainy afoot, and he was resolved to learn what it was.

Deep as Ben was in thought, he was not oblivious of what was occurring around him. All his meditations fled as the sound of a soft foot-step reached his ears, but, before he could turn, Lowell uttered a cry and sprung to his feet.

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY BLANKET.

THE movement made by Lowell was almost instantly followed by one on the part of Buckshot Ben; but while the former sprung forward, the latter went over the rock backward like a gymnast.

He had gained one glimpse of another man, and knowing Lowell had been assaulted, perhaps severely stabbed, he was not long in making pursuit.

As he fairly gained his balance he saw some one rapidly fleeing, and then he shot away in pursuit. The unknown seemed to be slight of form, and from the blanket which floated behind him, Ben suspected he was either an Indian or a Mexican.

The fugitive had taken to a gulch where the way was tolerably open, and his nimble feet took him forward at a rapid pace; but in his rear crashed the feet of Ben Brown, who covered three times the distance to a stride that his shorter limbs could span.

Nearer and nearer pressed the pursuer, and at last he spoke in his usual quiet way.

"It would save us both a heap of trouble if you should stop. Suppose we call the race a draw?"

His proposition seemed quite fair, but the stranger disregarded it, and kept going at full speed until Ben's heavy hand fell upon his shoulder. Then he stopped suddenly, turned, and the two stood face to face.

The miner had expected to be saluted by revolver or knife, but instead, the stranger stood passive and panting in his grasp. He saw, too, that he was scarcely more than a boy, and he offered no harshness.

"It's just as I told you," he said, calmly. "We have had our steeple-chase for nothing, and here you stand panting like a hound after a hot trail."

He paused, but the prisoner said nothing. He stood mute and motionless, except for his heavy breathing, and exhibited an air of sullenness.

"It may be impudence on my part," Brown continued, "but I would like to know who you are, and what you tried to do over yonder? We seldom stab men in the back in Idaho, and I can't approve of your way. Not a hair!"

Again he paused, but there was no reply.

"Do your hear?"

No answer was returned, and twisting his

fingers in the blanket, Ben deliberately lifted his prisoner from the ground.

"I don't know why you aggravate me," he said, "for we ain't evenly matched. In a tussle, I reckon I should win without turning a hair. Come, youngster, give your name and pedigree."

Before the youth could answer, hasty steps were heard, and Lowell approached the scene of interest. Ben saw that he showed no signs of weakness, and became wholly tranquil himself, but his prisoner suddenly started.

"What?—it is not—" he began, impetuously, and then stopped short.

"Not who?" Ben quietly asked.

"Never mind, but I have made a mistake," was the reply.

"So people usually think when they attempt assassination and get caught. Hello! how is it, Lowell?"

"All right," returned that young man, as he safely arrived. "What have you caught?"

"A nondescript, I should say. But what of yourself? Are you wounded?"

"No. This fellow introduced a knife between my body and arm, and I was a little startled at first, but I haven't a scratch to show for it."

Buckshot Ben turned to his prisoner. As nearly as he could judge in the darkness, the latter was a youth of less than twenty. He was slenderly built, and looked meek enough just then, but his captor did not forget that he had attempted murder.

In his opinion the exclamation before recorded was but a clumsy attempt to save himself. Brown remembered the warning note Lowell had received, and wondered if the writer had so soon struck.

"Young man," said he, "I should remark that an ante-mortem statement is in order. Who are you, and why did you try to kill this man?"

"It was a mistake," said the youth.

"Ah! in what way?"

"I mistook him for another person."

"May I ask whom?"

"That I cannot tell, but I assure you it was a mistake. Against this gentleman I have no enmity; in fact, he is a total stranger to me. I have an enemy at Shaker Gulch, and I believed this man was in my power when I struck. My blow I aimed was meant to kill, but I thank Heaven that I failed. Pardon me, but I cannot tell you the name of my enemy, as much as I would like to, but I swear that I intended no harm to your friend."

The youth spoke earnestly, and at times his voice shook perceptibly. He was very plainly alarmed at his position, but whether he was sincere beyond that point was a mystery.

"Do you expect us to believe this story?" Brown asked, in his usual quiet way.

"It is the truth; I swear it!"

The miner looked at Lowell in silence. Somehow he was inclined to believe the statement, absurd as it seemed, but Lowell was the most interested person. What was his opinion?

During the pause which followed, if one of them had looked a little into the background, he might have seen that there was an interested observer of the scene. Such a person was standing a few feet away, watching and listening with interest.

"To me," said Hubert Lowell, after a pause, "there seems to be but one explanation of this affair. Some enemy here in Shaker Gulch desires my death, and I have been warned to leave town. Now comes this attack, which seems to me like the second act in the drama."

"That is solid," said Buckshot Ben. "You see, young man, appearances are against you. I'm afraid you'll have to give an explanation, for you will admit that you are in over your boots. What's your name?"

The youth hesitated and seemed relapsing into sullenness.

"Billy Blanket," he finally said.

"Billy Thunder?" retorted Brown. "What's the use of fooling?"

"Don't you believe me?"

"Not a hair. Look you, young man, there have been threats of violence around here, and now the blow falls. If you can give a good account of yourself, all well and good; otherwise, I won't answer for the consequences."

Billy Blanket, as he had called himself, did not answer. He stood and trembled in Ben's grasp, and seemed on the point of breaking down.

At this ominous moment the silent listener moved forward, and both Ben and Lowell grew surprised. They recognized Ida Williston, and she was the last person in Shaker Gulch they would have expected to see there.

"I hope you will excuse my intrusion," she said, "but chance has made me a witness of this scene, and I cannot but be interested."

"You need not apologize, Miss Williston," said Hubert, quickly; "but I am afraid you will find the interview an unpleasant one. When men are at war—"

"It is time for women to interfere," she interrupted, firmly. "I have heard enough here to understand all, and I believe that this boy has told the truth."

The object of her opinion raised his head and

gave her a grateful look, Ben Brown stroked his beard and thought more than he said, while Lowell looked decidedly embarrassed.

"I would be glad to share your opinion, Miss Williston," he said, "but this long gash in my coat, less than an inch from my body, is a mark of most venomous hatred."

"Just a hair," remarked Brown.

"He has said that he was mistaken in the person, and I believe him," repeated Ida.

Lowell was in a dilemma and oscillating like a pendulum. On one side was a natural desire for vengeance; on the other, the esteem of Miss Williston.

"I tell you there is sincerity in his face and voice," resumed the girl, earnestly. "I could almost swear that he spoke truthfully, and if he has a secret he wishes to keep, you surely would not wrest it from him. You are a strong man; he is but a boy. A war between you would be unequal. I pray you, Hubert, be merciful!"

Buckshot Ben dropped his hand from the boy's shoulder. He knew how it would end. He was practically out of the game; the matter would be settled between Lowell and Ida, and he could foresee how the former would yield. He was a reed in her hands, and that she meant to use her power was shown by the fact that, for the first time in her life, she called him by his christian name.

"You are asking much of me," said Lowell, who was not wholly of clay.

"I know it, but I am sure I ask only justice."

"When a man's life has been menaced, he usually consults revenge rather than justice, and I can not look on this young fellow with friendship. He stands proved an assassin; he intended to kill some one, though, possibly, not me. He who would stab an unsuspecting man in the back is hardly a fair candidate for mercy; but, Miss Ida, for your sake, I will overlook all!"

Something like a smile crossed Ben Brown's face. His ally had made a point and he was glad of it.

Billy Blanket, however, turned to Ida, caught her hand and pressed kisses upon it.

"May heaven forever bless you!" he murmured, brokenly; "may you, too, find friends in misfortune!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOLVES OF THE GULCH.

IDA made an answer which Buckshot Ben did not overhear, and then a silence fell upon the group. It was the miner who spoke first:

"How is it—are we going to have a few explanations, or must the convention adjourn without light?"

"What do you wish to know?" Ida asked.

"We have abandoned all claim on Mr. Billy Blanket, but would esteem it a favor if he would divulge out of pure philanthropy."

Ida hesitated, and the youth faintly muttered:

"I can tell nothing!"

"Leave us alone, if you will," said Ida. "If he sees fit to make any explanation, he will certainly do so to me, and I will tell whatever he wishes. Go, and I will see you to-morrow."

"What! leave you alone with him?" cried Lowell.

"Yes."

"Never!"

"And why not?"

"He is an assassin. He attempted my life, and he may turn on you the moment we are gone."

Miss Williston laughed lightly.

"Don't fear for me, Mr. Lowell, I read this poor boy better than either of you, and I know I shall be safe with him. Now, don't annoy me, but go!"

Hubert hesitated and ended by obeying. He was filled with gloomy fears for Ida, but he yielded to her will as men usually do when they are in love. It was not weakness on his part, but policy. The most obstinate of men frequently allow themselves to be thus swayed, and Lowell had an eye on the future.

He went away followed by Ben Brown, who thought more than he said, and Ida Williston and her new friend were left alone. The latter again caught her hand.

"May heaven blow you!" he said.

"For befriending a murderer?" questioned Ida, with unexpected coldness.

"I am no murderer!" Billy Blanket passionately declared.

"You tried to kill my friend."

"It was a mistake; I swear it. Lady, you are a woman and should be pitiful. You could not be otherwise if you knew all."

"I do pity, and now I believe. Do you know why?"

"No."

"I know your secret!"

Billy Blanket uttered a little cry and turned as though to flee, but Ida caught his arm and drew him back. He made no resistance, but would have dropped on his knees had she not prevented the act.

"What do you fear?" she asked. "Have I said aught that was cruel or threatening? You say that a woman should have pity. Trust me, then, and I will not fail you."

Billy Blanket caught her hand and pressed kisses upon it anew. It seemed strange that one who had so lately possessed nerve enough to guide a knife on a deadly, but futile, mission, should be so weak and humble now. Boy though he was, he seemed far weaker than Ida; beside him, she was a tower of strength.

The scene was one, however, which was greedily observed by two men, who crouched among the rocks and watched all. They had seen the going of Ben Brown and his partner, and their eyes were now on Ida Williston.

Like every other place, Shaker Gulch had its hard characters, and in this instance they were unusually bad. A regular league bound the resident roughs together, as will soon be seen; and Mose Kirke and Hank Bemis, the men in ambush, were fair specimens of the band.

"This 'ere is w'ot folks call meller-drama," said Mose; "an' ther good Lord knows et are meller enough. Ther youngster is softer nor a ball of butter. I'll bet my head he's sheddin' tears, too."

"Never mind," said Hank. "Lay low, an' we will soon have our inning. When he's sent away, out goes me ter make love ter the beauty."

They had to wait some time for the chance.

Ida drew Billy Blanket back into a niche in the cliff, where the roughs could not hear what was said; and for half an hour the two conversed. What they said must have been of importance, for they were at all times very earnest, but not once did they seem likely to quarrel.

At last they left the niche, and walked down the gulch toward the village, side by side.

"So they go in pairs!" muttered Mose Kirke. "Bad, that is, fur our scheme. What do yer say?—shall we give up our game, or drop on ther two?"

"Give et up? Nary time," said Hank. "Kim on, an' when we reach 'em, I'll drop ther youngster so that he will never git up. Foller me!"

They strode down the gulch rapidly, while Ida and Billy Blanket never looked behind them. They seemed so wrapped up in other matters as to forget that there were human wolves in Shaker Gulch.

Still, appearances are often deceptive, and, just as the ruffians were about to spring upon their prey, Ida wheeled, and they saw a revolver covering them with deadly precision.

"Halt!" cried the girl. "Stand where you are, or I swear that I will shoot!"

"Why! what's ther row?" muttered Mose Kirke, his position that of a tiger thwarted in the act of leaping.

"I want you to know that I am neither blind nor deaf. I know something of the men of Shaker Gulch, and when I go abroad I am usually prepared to defend myself."

"We mean yer no harm."

"Then why were you creeping upon me like a pair of panthers?"

"It was ther boyee, marm."

"So you confess. Well, what of the boy? What grudge have you against him?"

The men hesitated, for they had no explanation ready, and they knew nothing of Billy Blanket, except what they had that night learned.

Hank Bemis, however, plainly seeing that only a bold push could save them, resolved to try an experiment.

"Wal, miss, ef murder is a crime, I hev a grudge ag'in' him. He killed my brother."

Ida laughed mockingly.

"It must have been a severe blow to your tender feelings. Come, men, let us have done with fooling. You have played your cards, and lost the game. Let it go at that, and go your way."

"We may as wal," said Mose, secretly touching his companion's foot. "Come, pard, hyer we go."

With their faces toward the village, they at once started; but Ida's voice again arose.

"Halt!" she said, clearly. "You will be so good as to keep together, and both pass on the same side of us. Since I have to watch you, I intend to do the work well."

The baffled ruffians obeyed, simply because they saw how unwavering was her revolver-hand, while neither could draw and fire himself, because they had no desire to shed her blood. They had hoped, by separating, to surround the weaker pair and achieve a victory; but Ida had foiled them.

They made no answer, but accepted her decision with seeming willingness. Bemis went past and Kirke slouched along in his rear, but the Western desperado is both stubborn and cunning and Mose was not disposed to give up the game.

Suddenly, he wheeled and leaped upon the girl, but the act came near costing him dearly. Her revolver cracked, a lump of lead tore through his hat, and then his powerful hand clasped her wrist.

"Durn yer!" he hissed, "I'll make yer howl fur that. So you would shoot me, you tiger-cat? Good! I know your way now, an' kin govern myself accordin'. Hyar, Hank—"

Up to this time Billy Blanket had seemed too frightened to speak, but his sudden activity

caused Mose to pause. A light leap had taken Billy to the ruffian's side, and once more that person found a revolver menacing him.

"Stand back, ruffians!" cried Billy Blanket, in a clear voice. "Release that girl or die!"

Mose hesitated, looking appealingly at Hank Bemis, but a new arrival changed the whole scene.

Into the midst of the group strode a tall, powerful man, and one push of his arm sent Mose Kirke staggering back.

"Dogs!" he shouted, "what in the fiend's name do you mean by this outrage?"

A hush succeeded the question and the two desperadoes seemed to cower before the newcomer like dogs, as he had termed them, before the lash.

Ida looked at him with interest, but it was little she discovered. His form was unfamiliar, while over his head was a huge mask, which was a most impenetrable disguise.

"Wal, really, cap'n—" began Mose Kirke, as soon as he could command his speech; but the unknown interrupted him by a gesture.

"Go!" he simply said.

Without a word, the men sneaked away, and then the masked man turned toward Ida and Billy Blanket. His gaze was on the latter, and he seemed interested, but Ida broke in upon his silence by expressing her thanks.

At this the man aroused; but, without a word, he strode away after the other men.

"Let him go," said Ida, quietly. "He has done us a favor, but I am inclined to think we are just as well off to know him little. Plainly, those roughs knew him, and I suspect he is their leader."

"Every one in this place seems to have a secret, a strange purpose or a deadly foe," said Billy, shivering.

Ida started.

"I believe you," she said, "but all can not be successful. It remains for time to separate the winners from the losers. Come, let us go."

They left the gulch and walked rapidly toward the village.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER.

BUCKSHOT BEN and Hubert Lowell at once returned to the village after leaving the gulch, but, by the time they arrived there, the latter had grown so troubled about Ida that he proposed to watch for her return.

He blamed himself for leaving her with a person of so vicious a turn of mind as Billy Blanket, and he said as much, but Ben's want of sympathy checked his flow of words.

The miner was willing to help the girl when she was in trouble, but he lacked Lowell's faith in her. In his opinion, a woman who would associate with Seba Williston, alias El Cuchillo, must be an ally in his schemes or have some great object to accomplish.

They waited until, some time later, Ida appeared, coming from the direction of the gulch. She was not alone, however, and the sight of Billy Blanket caused Lowell a pang of jealousy.

He could forgive her for acting as his champion, but it began to appear as though he was her lover.

The two went on until they reached the post-office, which was dark and silent, and then Lowell turned abruptly away.

"Come!" he sharply said.

"Where?"

"Back to the hotel."

"We may learn something of interest by staying here."

"I care nothing for it. It is very plain that I have been a fool to think of Ida Williston. This Billy Blanket is an old acquaintance of hers, and from the way she receives him at her own house, I should say, a valued one. What of it? I am a stranger in this town; I take a fancy to a pretty girl; she talks civilly with me, but really loves another man. As a result, I'll slope to-morrow as I announced at the hotel."

"Now, young man, you're getting in over your boots. Go slow. It don't follow that this boy in the blanket is the chosen of the world's flock. Suppose he is a stranger in Shaker Gulch and out of money. It would be but charity for the girl to give him bread to eat."

"She took his part quickly enough."

"A woman's way."

"Well, my way is to shake the dust of this town from my feet."

"Don't do it. There's no occasion for it—not a bit."

Some further persuasion was needed, but Ben Brown triumphed in the end as might be expected. Yet, his advice lacked ingenuousness. He wished Lowell to stay in order to aid him to find the author of the letter of warning.

When that person was found, the writer of the letter found on Placer Pete's body would also be unmasked, and Buckshot Ben did not forget why he had come to Shaker Gulch.

They went back to the American Hotel and to their respective rooms.

Brown lighted his pipe and sat down to smoke and think, for in no other way could he think so well.

Each day, almost each hour, was rolling up events which might be taken as evidence, and

he was troubled to separate the gold from the dross. The latest conundrum was, Had the attack of Billy Blanket really been a mistake, or was he the person who sought Lowell's life?

Brown had been so sure that the boy told the truth that he had allowed him to go, but, alone in his chamber, he began to doubt the wisdom of his course.

"I depend too much on my judgment when I should press matters to the wall," he muttered. "I should, at least, have learned the identity of this lad, but Ida Williston bent Lowell like a bow and I went with the tide."

Steadily the miner smoked and thought until his pipe burned low, and then he extinguished the light and went to bed; but sleep did not come at his bidding, and, after a while, he arose and opened a small bundle he had brought from Cactus Creek.

From this, he drew out an article which, when unfolded, proved to be a mask large enough to conceal his whole head. In his adventurous career he had often had occasion to use such an article, and he had little faith in the ordinary mask of social gatherings.

He completed his arrangements by arming himself thoroughly, and then, with his mask in his pocket, went to the window and looked out.

"I reckon I'll take the jump," he muttered, "and then if any one in the hotel is suspicious of me, they will be thrown off the track."

It was not a dangerous leap, and he was soon on the ground and on his way to the post-office, for it was a strong desire to look upon that place which had led him to desert his bed at the hotel.

Really, he expected nothing to come of it, but he had been struck by the fancy to see how the place looked at midnight.

Shaker Gulch was not a far-reaching place, and he was soon at the Williston house. He walked entirely around it and used his eyes well during the circuit. The room occupied by Ida was dark, as was the office, but from the windows of the postmaster's own room, a bright light shone forth.

"So my old friend, El Cuchillo is wide awake. That used to be an old fault of his on the California trail; when he took toll it was mighty hard to jump the gate and save the fee. But, why should Seba Williston, the honorable and wealthy postmaster of Shaker Gulch, burn midnight oil? One would suppose him a man without haunting cares and, consequently, an early retiree. I am more than ever persuaded that El Cuchillo's reform only goes skin-deep."

He watched the light in silence for a while, wondering what Seba was doing, and then it suddenly disappeared.

"Good! My old friend goes to bed. He has completed the last novel, or counted up his gains on the road, or whatever has been his midnight task, and—Hello!"

Buckshot Ben broke off suddenly as a light appeared in the corner room wherein was the post-office, and all of his indolence at once vanished.

"What now? Seba has not gone to bed, but to the post-office at midnight. What does that mean? I'll watch further."

He did watch, but the light remained in the room, and he could but conclude that Williston had found important employment. It might be legitimate and honest work, but Ben Brown was skeptical.

After a while he moved toward the building and stood by one window, but every curtain was down and not a view of the interior could be got.

"I want to go in there, but how? The door is locked and the windows are as bad. Things look dubious, but I must at least look in; I must know what business Seba has in his office at the dead hour of midnight."

Luck was in favor of the miner, for he soon discovered that the woodwork had so shrunk since the window was put in that there was quite a space where the upper and lower sashes met; and by inserting his knife he managed to turn back the catch and the way was open.

Cautiously he raised the lower sash, pushed aside the curtain and looked within the room.

The whole scene, including Williston, was revealed, and the employment of the honorable postmaster at once interested him.

Shaker Gulch had not then attained the dignity of elaborate conveniences, and the mail was passed over an ordinary counter. Behind this rude affair Williston now sat, the mail-bag in which had lately been locked the outgoing letters at his right hand, and just in front of him a pile of loose articles intended for the leathern bag.

Watching, Ben saw the postmaster deliberately open one of these letters and read it, after which he replaced it in the envelope. Several others were similarly served, and from one he obtained a greenback with a "5" in the corner.

His skill aroused Brown's admiration, but it also aroused a desire to walk in upon the ex-road-agent.

All this was easy enough for one of his sagacity, and, as the window was not within range, he managed to enter without arousing Williston's suspicions; after which he crept along on

the floor until only the counter separated him and the postmaster.

Still the latter went on, opening letter after letter, and sealing them again with great skill, but he was destined to have a most disagreeable surprise.

Suddenly a dark object arose from behind the counter, speedily resolving itself into the form of a man with a huge mask over his head, while at the same time two revolvers were turned full upon him.

"I say, pard, is there any mail for me?" Ben coolly asked.

The situation was impressive. The intruder had helped himself to a convenient chair and now sat at his ease, each elbow planted on the counter, each hand grasping a revolver, each muzzle covering Seba's face.

The latter had dropped his letter and, pale and confused, was cowering back in his chair, staring wildly at his unexpected guest.

"What's the news?" Brown continued. "Has Pete Jenkins' girl written to him? How's Union Pacific stock in New York? Anything new from the hay crop in Maine?"

Still Williston remained silent. Probably this strange man was a robber who would clean out the whole office and murder him; at the very least, he was a bold fellow who had seen too much.

The postmaster was no coward, and as he realized the situation his hand glided under the counter for his own weapon, but Ben Brown was not at all blind.

"Hold on there, Seba!" he commanded. "I run the lead in this game, and if you try to draw, you're a dead man!"

CHAPTER IX.

BEN BROWN WINS AND LOSES.

A LOOK of baffled rage crept over Williston's face at being thus thwarted, but he had become perfectly calm and all the old energy which had made him feared so much on the Santa Barbara trail came to his aid.

"Well, what do you want?" he harshly asked.

"First of all, lay your hands on the counter where I can see them. I don't want any cards turned under the board when revolvers are trumps. That's good! Now, then, what do I want?"

"That's what I said."

"I asked if there was a letter for me."

"What's your name?"

"Oho! you would like to know, would you? Never mind; call me your Nemesis, or anything you choose. You're a precious rascal, Seba, ain't you? No wonder you live well as postmaster, but I'm surprised that you don't get caught. A nice, sleek, fat rascal, you are!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Williston, blusteringly.

"Simply that I know the mail-robber of the Idaho district. There has been a good deal of inquiry, and I'm a detective from Denver, working up the case. I've run the game to earth."

"I believe you're a liar!" was the defiant answer.

"You underrate my ability. Let me convince you I am a solid man. Did you ever hear of a critter called Placer Pete?"

It was a test question and the keen eyes of Buckshot Ben were upon Williston's face, but he did not see a muscle quiver.

"No," was the composed reply.

"I believe you. Well, did you ever hear of El Cuchillo?"

Carelessly the words fell from his lips, but they were like a spark on gunpowder. Instantly, Seba Williston sprang to his feet, knocking over his chair, and a terrible gray hue overspread his face. If ever a man was frightened it was the postmaster of Shaker Gulch, and yet Ben Brown knew him to be a man of wonderful nerve.

"Sit down, Seba!" he quietly continued.

Still silent, the man slowly settled down; his gaze upon his enemy, but the chair was not in place and he had to stoop to raise it.

Then it was that a brilliant idea flashed upon him; he was a dead shot, and if he could once get his hand on the revolver which lay in a niche under the counter, he could make it hot for the masked man.

To all appearances, his little game was not suspected, for no warning word arose, but when he reached out his hand for the revolver, it was gone.

"Here she is!" quoth Buckshot Ben, serenely. "I knew, of course, what you would try to do; and while you picked up your chair, I picked up your six-shooter. I know the ways of El Cuchillo too well to give him a chance at me."

Williston settled into his chair sullenly. He saw himself in a tight corner, but he had crawled from many a worse one in the past. His fighting blood was all at the front—that coolness and skill that had made him so feared around Santa Barbara—and he fully expected to win in the end.

Just when his triumph would come he did not know, for the two menacing revolvers were held with a practical grip.

"What do mean by this infernal nonsense?" he demanded.

"What nonsense?"

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"This talk about El Cuchillo, it doesn't do it."

"I fail to see where the nonsense comes in. You were anything but a joker when you boasted the name, and I reckon, Seba, your claws ain't very dull yet."

"You have me foul. Who in blazes is El Cuchillo? Come, I think you are talking to gain time. What do you want, anyhow?"

"I will tell you. I want your life! Perhaps you wonder why I don't take it; when one touch on these triggers would send your soul whooping after the old brigands who rode the Santa Barbara trail with you. It is because I am not yet ready—your day has not come. I've sworn to kill you; I've rode hot haste all the way from California, but I'm going to play with you before I crush out your life. You can live a while longer."

"Your forbearance is charming," sneered Williston; "but I wish to say to you that you are barking up the wrong tree. I am not El Cuchillo, nor do I know anything about the man."

"No comment is needed on that remark, Seba. I did not expect you would admit it."

"Now, let me ask who you are and why you are in the sanctuary of the United States Government at this hour of the night?"

Brown indulged in a quiet laugh.

"Sanctuary! That is good, Seba. So, a sanctuary is a place where dishonest postmasters purloin cash from letters of other men? Excellent!"

"Let that part pass. Who are you?"

Williston was talking quietly, but he had to deal with a man as shrewd as himself. Buckshot Ben detected the glitter in the great gray eyes, he remembered so well in the days of El Cuchillo, and to himself he was saying:

"This fellow intends to attack me. He sees in me a most dangerous man, and he will risk all in an attempt to get the drop on me."

Aloud, he blandly answered the question:

"You may not believe it, but I am named John Smith. I am a German, as the name shows."

"Do you know that you have laid yourself liable to the law by coming here?"

"Yes, but who will betray me? You will not, because in that case I would say, 'This is El Cuchillo, road-agent and murderer.' That would make it bad for you, Seba; just a hair!"

There was truth in this assertion, as Williston well knew; but it was on a different course he intended to rely. Ben Brown had read the glitter in his eyes aright. The cornered man did not intend to let his visitor leave him alive, and he was preparing to take his chances against the leveled revolver. As El Cuchillo he had often taken such risks, and the old blood was in his veins.

Buckshot had quietly put away one of his weapons; so there was but a single muzzle to fear.

Suddenly up went the ex-road-agent's hand in a lightning-like sweep, intended to dash the revolver to the furthestmost corner of the room.

The result surprised El Cuchillo.

With a quick, easy motion, Ben Brown tossed the revolver over his own head, where it fell clattering on the floor, and at the same time his other hand met and grasped that of the postmaster.

Thus, the seemingly rash act of the man-hunter placed them on equal terms, both, to all appearances, unarmed, and only the counter between them.

"Stop!" said Brown in a tone which compelled obedience. "You hanker for a meeting with n', and your wish shall be gratified: I have voluntarily surrendered my advantage; now let El Cuchillo show his boasted prowess!"

It was like a challenge to a hungry tiger, and the last word had hardly passed his lips when, with a light bound, Williston cleared the counter, and they grappled.

It was a meeting of giants. Both were muscular men, hardened by years of wild life, and skillful in every art of offense and defense, and as they caught for hold the air seemed to grow heavy, as before a veritable battle.

There was no unnecessary maneuvering, but at once they settled down to work, each with a good deal for which to fight.

With Williston it was almost life with Ben Brown; twas revenge.

A fierce joy swept over the quiet miner as he found his enemy in his grasp. He hated him for his crimes, and for the moment he forgot the reprieve he had granted, and only desired victory that he might kill him, where he lay.

Back and forth, back and forth! but this was no "scientific" wrestle to win the plaudits of an audience. Real physical contests are soon settled.

Just how it happened Williston never knew, but he was suddenly plucked from his feet and cast upon the floor, and then the heavy knee of Ben Brown was planted upon his chest.

Near them lay the man-hunter's discarded revolver, and in a moment more its muzzle was covering Williston.

"You are fairly thrown—lie still!" he tersely said.

It was a command the ex-road-agent did not dare defy.

He had tested the mettle of his adversary, and

he saw that in the menacing flash of the eyes visible through the mask to teach him wisdom for the future.

What might have come next had they been left alone is uncertain, for at that moment the door at the foot of the stairs was thrown open and Ida made her appearance.

Evidently she had once retired for the night, for her hair hung loosely down her shoulders, but it only served to heighten the effect of a picture which would have been charming under other circumstances.

What was womanly in her nature fell back at once to the rear, and as she leveled a revolver at Buckshot Ben he felt a momentary thrill of apprehension and put out his hand with open palm.

He knew she could not recognize him, and as he could not save himself by shooting a woman, he was anxious to make terms if possible.

"Hold! coward and assassin!" cried the girl, in a thrilling voice. "Make one movement that is hostile and I will fire. I swear it!"

CHAPTER X.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF FORTUNE.

IDA'S words restored all of Buckshot Ben's coolness. She did not intend to shoot him down in cold blood, and he trusted to luck to get out of his predicament with an unbroken head. Now that it was too late, he regretted having given the postmaster a chance, for it had complicated matters not a little.

The girl, of course, did not know that this midnight intruder was Ben Brown, and she would naturally go against him, while it would not do for him to betray his identity to her as a means of safety.

More than ever he wished he knew what bond united her to the fortunes of Seba Williston; if she was as unscrupulous as was he, vigorous measures would be excusable.

Still keeping his position the man-hunter laughed lightly.

"Here's an original tableau; no extra charge," he observed, coolly.

"Shoot, Ida; for Heaven's sake, shoot to kill," cried Williston, from under that heavy knee.

"I hold an empty hand toward you, young lady," said Ben Brown, steadily, "and even the red Indian heeds that sign of friendship."

Ida stood irresolute. One hostile movement from the masked man would have sealed his fate, but he had taken just the course to save himself.

She could not harm a man who acted thus, great as was her natural horror of men who do dark deeds at midnight.

"Will you let him kill me?" roared the postmaster.

"I am not in a killing mood," said Ben, with his light laugh. "You know, and so do I, that I might have bored you through and through long ago had I been so disposed. I came here on a peaceful errand, however."

"It looks like it, you infernal hound!" began Williston furiously, but a slight pressure of Ben's knee brought him to a premature halt.

"Young lady," continued the man-hunter, "if you want to know who is right and who wrong in this case, look at the United States mail on the counter. This model postmaster became so devoted to business that he felt a call to work at unseemly hours, and I just dropped in for a little chat. Seba, old man, have I stolen anything?"

"No," the man sullenly said.

"Have you?"

"None of your business."

"The mail-bag will answer that. Miss, I don't know how strong you pull in Seba's boat, but you can see how the case stands."

Ida had glanced toward the scattered letters, and she now made a gesture to stop him.

"Say no more of that. Let us speak of yourself. Why are you in this office?"

"Simply to see what business called the honorable postmaster here at this hour."

"Well, have you discovered?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose you are ready to go?"

"I am."

"But I am not!" declared Williston; "and, by the gods, you don't go away alive. You will find you have meddled with the wrong man. Ida, I command you to menace this desperado with your revolver until he allows me to arise."

"Useless, Seba, useless!" commented Brown.

"Ida, do you hear?"

The girl replied affirmatively, but she made no motion to obey. Strangely or otherwise, her sympathies were with the masked man. Of him she knew nothing, but of Williston she knew much that was bad. The sacred contents of the United States mail-bag lay scattered on the counter—sure proof of the official's crime.

It was but one in the long list known to her, and her heart was like lead in her bosom. Bound to the fortunes of the man by a tie strong as the love of life, she still loathed and hated him.

All she now cared for was to prevent trouble between these men, and the easiest way was to have the masked man go.

"I see no occasion for trouble," said Buckshot Ben, watching her face keenly, "and I move that the meeting be dissolved."

"Ida, I command you to obey me!" snarled Williston.

"In my opinion, this stranger suggests the better way, sir," she answered.

"Do you refuse to obey me?"

She hesitated, for well did she know that this man really held her in his power. Doubt, irresolution and alarm were pictured on her face, but Williston gave her little time to reflect.

"Disobey me in this," he cried, "and I swear that you shall never find Egbert Hadley."

The shot went home; the color fled from her cheeks until, standing in the dim light, her hair floating back over her shoulders, she looked almost like a phantom visitor; and Ben Brown did not fail to notice the sudden wavering of the hand which held her revolver.

From face to face flashed the keen gaze of the man-hunter, reading both so far as was possible, but Williston looked only at Ida.

"Choose, now and forever," he resumed, "and remember to consult your own good. Obey me and I swear to find the missing man; disobey, and not all the tears and whining you can muster will move me!"

"Have mercy!" murmured Ida.

"Wait!" said Buckshot Ben. "Maybe I can work in usefully here. Egbert Hadley? Do you want to find a man of that name, miss?"

"Yes, sir, oh! yes! Can you tell me of him? Do this, and may heaven bless you!" the girl cried.

"Was he your lover?"

"Beware, Ida!" cried Williston. "This man is a bitter enemy to you and me. Trust him, and you will bitterly repent it. Your only hope is with me; I swear it. Come, girl, advance and cover this dog! He is crushing out my life under his knee. Shoot him! shoot him!"

Poor Ida, swayed by emotions too deep to be resisted, advanced a pace, but Ben Brown was not disposed to yield.

With a sudden, wonderfully sudden movement, he sprang to his feet, at the same time lifting his prisoner, and in a moment more he stood with him for a shield, his own revolver pressed to the villain's temple.

"Hands up, Seba!" he said, coolly. "I hold the drop after all, and one movement on the part of your ally or yourself sends a bullet crashing through your head. Choose well!"

A brief silence fell upon the trio. Ida stood in irresolution, not knowing where to place her sympathies, but well aware that her own time for action had passed.

Williston was furious. Bold, hard fighter that he was, he feared no one, but he was well aware that the masked man held his life in his hands.

Ben broke the silence with a light laugh.

"Now, then, we will begin anew. Shadowy secrets are out of the game and we stand on solid soil. Allow me to ask if any one here objects to my going?"

The speaker was looking at Ida, and, before an answer was returned, he saw a change pass over her face which was not to be disregarded. Her face was turned toward him, but she seemed to look beyond, and the intensity of her gaze told that she saw something of importance.

Ben became at once on the alert, and to his ears came a well-known sound. It was the rustling of a curtain, and he was sure some other person had entered by the window.

Danger was abroad, but he was equal to the emergency. Directly in front of him was a looking glass of considerable size, in which he had already studied the face of Williston; and one look in that direction revealed the new danger.

He saw the curtain and beside it, a sharp, dark face, with gleaming eyes and exposed teeth—that of Deaf Dan, the half-blood!

Nor was that all.

In his hand the youth held a long-bladed knife, and with a wild gleam in his wicked eyes, he bent and glided toward the masked man like an Indian.

Buckshot Ben was equal to the emergency. Without stirring his body or head, the muzzle of his revolver was suddenly changed from front to rear; a report followed, a fall, a glitter in the air; another fall; and then Ben Brown and Ida alone remained standing.

The girl saw Williston and Deaf Dan both down, and she was dimly conscious that Ben, after shooting the mute, had turned the weapon upon his master as a club; but, accustomed as she was to scenes of fighting, she had never seen such rapid and effective work as that.

Both Seba and his servant lay without sign of life.

"We hold the fort, young woman," said the victor, as coolly as ever. "I trust you will not regard me as your enemy."

"I will not," she said, promptly, "but I beg that you will go from here at once. Yonder man is utterly merciless, and—and I know you!"

"Are you sure?"

"I am, though the knowledge has but just come to me. To night, in the gulch, you spared

Billy Blanket at my request. For that I wish you well, but, for heaven's sake, go, go!"

It was advice Ben knew to be good, and he felt that the secret was safe with her, but he feared for her own safety when Williston recovered.

She smiled faintly.

"He will find me on the floor in a swoon," she said, "and, besides, I have little fear of him. Go, my friend, go!"

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

BROWN had no desire to delay longer, for he might find himself seized for assault and battery. That it could be no worse than that was soon proved by an examination of Deaf Dan. He had a bullet wound along his scalp, but nothing that was dangerous.

"Look out for yourself, young woman," said the man hunter, "and if you need a friend, just call on me. I am strong in the belief that we can pull paired-oars and never make a slip. Good-night!"

He went to the window, raised it and passed out, at once hurrying away toward his hotel.

Ida carried out her little plan, and when consciousness returned to Williston, he saw that he was the only person moving in the room. His whole head ached, but this did not prevent his remembering what had occurred.

He saw Ida and the deaf-mute, and then he bounded to his feet. For a moment he had a hope that the masked man might still be near, but a brief search showed that he was really gone.

"Yes," he muttered, savagely, "he is gone, and with him goes my peace of mind. He knows too much, but I'll hunt him down and end his work. I have a suspicion—"

He ceased talking, bent over Deaf Dan and looked to his wound, and then brought water and bathed his head. Ida he totally disregarded, but she thought it time to arouse from her "swoon" and acted accordingly.

Williston looked at her with a scowl.

"You ought to be proud of your work," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you and I are liable to wind up our career on the gallows yet. That demon who visited us knows too much; he can ruin us if he sees fit, for you will share whatever trouble he brings on my devoted head."

"I have expected as much ever since I became your ally."

"Indeed! Well, I shall never try very hard to save you. This man was in our power, to-night; one touch of your finger would have sent a bullet through his head. Instead—"

"Pardon me, but I am no assassin."

He arose quickly and faced her with a dark look on his face.

"Your scruples may be very charming," he said, "but they are not practical. If we succeed in this world, we must not let human life stand in our way."

"I know your nature," she retorted, bitterly. "I can never forget it. I remember your attack on the Mexican ranch—a night which is full of horror. The shouts of the fighting men, the screams of the women, the oaths, the groans, the vain appeals for mercy, the red light of the doomed building—oh! it is a picture which will live in my memory for a lifetime!"

Ida covered her face with her hands, as though to shut out the sight, but Williston only shrugged his shoulders.

"Let us pass over that; let us speak of the future. I want to say that I am on the track of Egbert Hadley; in fact, I have quite definite information, and I hope to know all shortly. Whether that information is passed along to you depends on yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I have a game in my mind where I need your aid. You know Sibyl Roswell, of the American Hotel?"

"Certainly."

"I wish to make her my wife."

"Judging from the way she smiles upon you, I do not think your labors will be in vain."

"Bah! she is a woman, and all women are uncertain. Well, I wish to marry Sibyl, and if you will help me I'll help you."

"What can I do?"

"Pretend to be charmed with her. See her every day, invite her here, praise me cautiously, speak of my wealth, and so on. Will you do it?"

"Yes," was the prompt reply.

Just then Deaf Dan sat upright and put his hand to his wounded head. He grimaced, and then Williston, using the common deaf-and-dumb alphabet, directed him to follow up-stairs and have his wound dressed.

The mute moved his keen eyes in a survey of the room.

"Who was that man?" he spelled on his fingers.

"I am not sure," Seba answered, "though I have a suspicion. Did you watch the man Brown?"

"I did. I laid in front of the hotel a long time. He entered four hours ago and has not since left the place."

"Then it was not he. I suspected him, but we must look further. Come up-stairs."

The postmaster turned toward the door and then looked at the scattered mail matter, paused, went to the counter, replaced everything, and locked the bag.

This done, they went up-stairs, and Ida only paused to finish putting things in order before following. In doing this she noticed two letters lying somewhat at one side. She picked them up and looked at the superscription. One was unimportant, but on the other she read the name: "John Marble!"

The girl started slightly, for she had not forgotten how Buckshot Ben came to her to inquire about "John Marble," and as she saw that both letters had been opened, she acted on the impulse of the moment and shoved them into her pocket, after which she went up-stairs and to her room.

Once there, she drew from the envelope addressed to John Marble, this brief and, apparently, cautiously worded note:

"A dispatch from Phenix, Arizona, announces the death by suicide, at a camp called Cactus Creek, of a miner called Placer Pete; but it says that his real name and former residence are unknown, and that only unimportant papers were found on his person. It strikes me this is not what you expected, and I await your reply."

To this note there was no signature; it ended as abruptly as it began. Ida looked at the envelope and saw that it was postmarked "San Francisco."

"Plainly, this is the letter for which Mr. Brown was inquiring, and I suppose his real name is John Marble. But, no; he also inquired if there was a man of that name in Shaker Gulch. He is not John Marble, but he is in some way connected with him. It is lucky that I found this letter, and he shall have it, for, somehow, I begin to feel confidence in him. So Williston suspected the masked man was he! Well, for once, Deaf Dan has made a mistake, and they are off the track."

Had she known that Ben, when starting out on his visit to the post-office, had left the hotel by means of a rear window, she would have understood how the mute, who watched only the front, had made his mistake.

The following morning Hubert Lowell, acting by the advice of Buckshot, stated that he had concluded to remain in Shaker Gulch for a few days longer, and all the other boarders expressed their pleasure.

The pards had not yet learned from whence came the letter giving him warning, but as no marks were visible to show that the unknown had entered by means of the window, Ben Brown was positive that it had emanated from one of the boarders.

He went out after breakfast and sauntered over to the post-office as coolly as though he had no reason to dread Seba's wrath.

He found Ida in the office and was greeted by a pleasant nod.

"You are looking as fresh as a rose, Miss Williston," he observed.

"It is a wonder we are both alive now," she said. "Last night was full of terror."

He glanced toward the inside doors, but she understood the look and added:

"Both Williston and Deaf Dan have gone out."

"Were they injured?"

"Only slightly," she replied; and then told what had occurred after his departure, producing the letter at the end.

Ben could not hide his pleasure when he saw the name on the envelope, and he was soon reading the note.

After the first look of pleasure, his bronzed face told no tales, but he did not underrate the importance of his discovery. The note was enigmatical in many respects, but one thing was very plain.

He had made no mistake in coming to Shaker Gulch, and in that town lay the explanation of the mystery of the red revolver.

"What is your theory concerning this letter, Miss Ida?" he asked, when he had finished reading.

"Really, I have none, for the reason that all the parties mentioned are strangers to me."

"Have you no idea who John Marble is?"

"None whatever. I thought you might be he."

"I am not; but I want to find the man just the same. Can it be Williston? The fact that he left this letter out of the lot looks as though it might be his own. Otherwise he would have delivered it to its owner."

"It does appear likely."

Brown looked thoughtfully at his fair companion. He remembered the theory formed in Cactus Creek that whoever was the slayer of Placer Pete had a female ally. Granting that Seba Williston was the guilty party, who was so likely to be that ally as Miss Ida herself.

It did look reasonable, but as Buckshot looked at her clear, honest eyes he could not believe it, and he resolved to proceed as though she was known to be innocent.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER MIDNIGHT.

"MISS WILLISTON," the man-hunter respectfully said, "I hope you will pardon me when I

say that I am filled with wonder to know the nature of the bond between you and the postmaster. I refer to him thus because I am quite sure he is not your father."

The girl looked startled, then thoughtful, and finally answered earnestly:

"You are the first person in Shaker Gulch who has expressed a doubt, and if I speak more plainly to you, I must be sure that you are my friend."

"That is right, perfectly right; and yet I can only give you my word. In some cases pledges are scaly things, but you are a woman, and I never—never went back on one that was square."

Ida did not fail to perceive the little quiver in his voice, and she held out her hand quickly.

"I will trust you," she said.

"Then we are pards from this out," he quietly said, as he released her hand.

"Well, in the first place, I am not the daughter of Seba Williston, for which I thank heaven. It is bad enough to be near such a wretch day by day, but it would be far worse were he my father."

"I understand, for I know him pretty well myself. El Cuchillo cut quite a figure down round Santa Barbara once."

"I know," she answered, with a shudder.

"He is a desperate wretch, despite the fact that he is the postmaster of Shaker Gulch. The postmaster! Ah! what would the people say had they seen what we saw last night. But, despite all, I have followed his fortunes for a year. My reasons can not be given now, for I lack the time. I will see you again; but of one thing be assured—I am not a friend of Seba Williston."

"Exactly; I was sure of it. Well, miss, in this case we'll pull together, and we may be of mutual benefit. First of all, I want to know who John Marble is, and I believe a very simple trap will catch him. To-day, in your list of letters, write his name and see who will apply."

"But he may be Williston, himself."

Buckshot devoted some little time to thought, for he wished to guard Ida from all possible danger. While they stood thus, a man approached the outer door, but seeing the two, paused, and stood watching, unseen by them.

Suddenly Brown brightened.

"Have you a circular around here which is of no consequence?" he asked.

"Yes; here is an advertisement of a San Francisco soap company."

"Just the thing. Now give me a plain envelope."

She obeyed, and upon its surface he wrote the name of the mysterious John Marble, correctly addressing it to Shaker Gulch and pasting a defaced one-cent stamp in one corner.

"There," he added, "put this with your pile and await the result. Two to one John Marble walks into the trap, boots and all."

These words fell upon the ears of the man who stood outside the door, and that they were of interest was shown by the start he at once made. Over his face crept a gray hue, he glanced about as though expecting to see some enemy drop upon him, and then whisked out of sight around the corner.

Buckshot Ben went back to his hotel and made his way to his private room, where he sat down to reflect on this new bit of evidence.

"It's a big find—a bonanza!" he commented.

"It verifies my first theory that the murderer of Placer Pete is in Shaker Gulch. It seems there is also a partner in San Francisco. Now, to what extent is he mixed-up in the web? He may simply be a man to watch the papers—no, that is not a reasonable theory. If Marble has committed a murder, he would not take a man into his confidence merely to do what he could himself do."

"Now, it may be that Marble's assistant in the murder went straight to Frisco, but I suspect that a part of the mystery lies in California. Placer Pete was in somebody's way. Perhaps a rich relative has died and left him a fortune, which the second heir-at-law hankers after. At any rate, I believe an important link in the chain exists in California."

"Next this San Francisco man says: 'Only unimportant papers were found on his person. It strikes me this is not what you expected.' I am myself impressed by that belief—just a hair. I also conclude that our plotters desired certain papers to be found, and since they were not there, where are they?"

For a long time Buckshot Ben sat and stared at the wall, smoking steadily as he thought; and as usual, the cheering weed helped his mental wrappings.

Still, many theories were formed and discarded before he gave a sudden start as though at a convincing discovery.

"I have it," he thought, triumphantly. "The assassins of Placer Pete did not desire that he should go down to his grave unknown, and since he was merely known at Cactus Creek as Placer Pete, they intended to place on his person papers which would reveal his identity; but by some mistake the letter we did find there was used instead."

"All is now clear on that point. I wondered at the time why they brought the body to the cabin when it might have been flung into the

canyon, and forever hid from sight; but it seems they wanted the story of his death to go abroad in the land, accompanied by proof that he was—who? That's the question."

Long Ben Brown sat and smoked, and he planned for the future as much as possible, though he hoped the decoy letter would lure John Marble into his net, and at once bring matters to a crisis.

Had he known of the man who had stood outside the door and listened to his plan he would have had less faith in his decoy.

The day passed without event of importance, though Deaf Dan was twice seen around the hotel, which led Ben to suspect he might not be wholly out of Seba's mind.

In the afternoon, too, Ida Williston called on Sibyl Roswell, a lady-boarder at the hotel. The visitor met Mr. Brown naturally, while he, after a few words, sauntered out and took position on the piazza.

He did this principally because he could watch the two young women, and he knew Ida, at least, would not object.

He had not forgotten that Ida had told him of Williston's request that she would seek the society of Miss Roswell and aid him to win her as his wife, and he had a good deal of curiosity to know why the ex-road-agent had selected the lady.

Looking through the window, the man-hunter studied her closely.

She was, apparently, a woman of thirty years, and no one would think of pronouncing her past her years of power on Cupid's field. She had a style of beauty which is enduring, if not pleasing to those who admire women of the clinging-vine species, and in looks and manner she was brilliant and interesting.

Rather above the medium height, she also had a form of the "queenly" order; but it was compact, robust and graceful. Black hair and eyes, red cheeks and a handsome mouth went to increase her other charms; and as Buckshot Ben observed all these points, he could not wonder that Williston had taken a fancy to her.

"I reckon the old fox is really caught," he thought, as he finished the survey; "and, since he has settled down to a civilized life, it is not strange that he wants a partner. If Sibyl secures him, she gets a cash prize!"

He smiled quietly and settled down to his smoking, and in considering certain weighty questions then in his mind he utterly forgot the ladies inside the room.

He was recalled to the scenes of the present by the sweep of a lady's dress, and he looked up to see Miss Roswell.

Polite as usual, he at once arose and offered her a chair, but she made no motion toward taking it.

Her stillness caused him to look at her more closely, and then, for the first time, he perceived that there was a storm on the horizon. Miss Roswell's eyes glittered ominously, and in every way she showed signs of anger.

"Mr. Brown!" she began, in what seemed an unnecessarily high key.

"That's my name, miss," he acknowledged.

"Ben Brown, late of Alaska."

"Very likely you are from Alaska, for you show ill-breeding in every way. You are as bad as a Root Digger, but your superior advantages make you amenable to society."

"Just a hair!" Ben admitted, in amazement.

"Don't insult me, sir!" cried the woman, with a stamp of her foot.

"I won't. I'm not yet in over my boots, and I'll beat a retreat before the first battle."

"Coward! you shall answer for this!"

"It's a blessed privilege, miss, and I'll try to be duly thankful; but if my future bliss hung suspended by a thread, I couldn't tell what this racket is about. You seem excited about something, and if I've committed a breach of the peace, I'm just as anxious to apologize as any gajoot could be. I trust you'll excuse my ignorance, and, in making your statement, toss small words over to me as a rule."

The man-hunter spoke in a pleasant, easy way which would have settled an ordinary storm; but Sibyl Roswell evidently had deep cause for anger, for the frown did not leave her face.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE QUARREL.

BUCKSHOT BEN was a good deal surprised at being so warmly addressed, but he was not long in deciding that he was not called upon to humiliate himself.

He had not said or done anything which could be construed as an insult to Sibyl Roswell, and since she had so far forgotten herself as to fall into a passion, he would let her go her length.

As he finished his last remark, however, a new-comer arrived on the scene, coming through the window by which Ben and Sibyl had gained the piazza.

Both recognized him, for he was one of the boarders at the hotel, a man casually mentioned in a preceding chapter, and named Julian Parsons.

Accompanied by a friend whose name was Merritt, he had been for some time in Shaker

Gulch and had been talking a good deal with mine-owners concerning stock, for he was acting for an Eastern house.

The arrival of Mr. Parsons just then proved unfortunate for Ben Brown, for Miss Roswell at once turned to him.

"Sir," she cried, "I appeal to you to protect me from this brute!"

Parsons looked amazed.

"To—to— Pardon me, I think I misunderstood you," he said.

"I spoke plainly enough, and with so much cause that if I was a man I would horse-whip this fellow who—"

"I'm afraid you would thus get in over your boots, miss," said Ben Brown, gently. "Suppose now, that we have a new deal and all hold the cards above the board in a white way—"

"Mr. Parsons, I appeal to you to protect me," again said Sibyl.

"Have you had trouble?" blandly asked Julian.

"Not a hair," said Ben.

"It is false! Listen, Mr. Parsons. I have just had a lady visitor in yonder room, and while she was there I discovered that this fellow was listening to all we said. I kept quiet until I was alone, and then came here to remonstrate with this man. He received me with ridicule and insults, and—and—"

Here Miss Roswell broke down and began to sob in a passionate way.

"Really—really—this is strange!" muttered Parsons, pulling nervously at his mustache.

"Where is the nearest asylum?" Ben inquired.

"The nearest—what?"

"Asylum—strait-jacket museum. She must be shut up before she does damage. She is far gone, now; her sobbing is like a norther twisting around some crooked canyon."

"This is no joking matter, sir," said Parsons, indignantly.

"Just my idea. It's too tame for real life and not suitable for the stage."

All this while Miss Roswell sat weeping in a chair, and the sight was evidently too much for Mr. Parsons's nerves. He began to look fierce and scowl at Ben Brown.

"You have pained this lady, and I think it would be proper for you to apologize."

"I've done so once, and now I consider it time for her to chip in. She has given me a wordy chastisement, which is bad for one of my delicate health, and she ought to pull up before she gets in over her boots."

"You're a ruffian, sir!" shouted Parsons.

"That's the fiftieth great discovery of the century. There are the printing press, the telegraph, the electric light, the—"

A deep rumbling roar came from Mr. Parsons's throat, and he jerked his revolver from his pocket and leveled it at the same moment. The muzzle almost touched Buckshot's nose, but he never moved an eyelash.

"The steam engine, the paper collar—"

He was going ahead bravely with his statistics, but once more Parsons interrupted him with a shout.

"Hang your impudence! Will you apologize?" he demanded.

"The lightning-rod and the air-brake— S'posen you lay down that pepper-box?" blandly suggested Mr. Brown, as though struck by a sudden idea.

"Not until you apologize to this lady," Parsons firmly answered.

"I have once said to her that if I have done wrong I'm ready to apologize, but as for listening to her private interview, I didn't. One more thing I wish to impress on your mind—I don't allow a man of ordinary caliber to tickle my nose with a six. I would lay it down if I were you."

"When you acknowledge your guilt and apologize I will do so."

"And not before?"

"No, sir!"

"In that case—"

Just as the last word passed the man-hunter's lips his hand arose in a swift sweep, and as it encountered Parsons' arm, the revolver went flying into the street.

"—I shall have to compel you," calmly finished Buckshot Ben.

With a furious exclamation Parsons leaped forward, his hands outstretched to seize his humiliator, but with the same remarkable quickness which marked all his important moves, Brown glided to one side and Parsons fell over the foot that somehow got in his way.

He bounded to his feet to see the cool miner laughing at him, but his blood was now at fever heat and he would not listen to the voice of prudence.

Again he rushed forward, but, without moving from his tracks, Ben seized him in an iron grasp, and held him away from the hold he would have secured.

"Parsons, if I was you, I'd go and shoot myself right away. You're getting in over your boots, sure as thunder!"

It was good advice, but Parsons began a vicious kicking which was too much for even Buckshot Ben's good nature. He bent his great muscles to the work; Parsons's heels went up in the air, and then he lay flat on the floor be-

neath the knee and heavy hand of his conqueror.

Sibyl Roswell had arisen, and now she stared at this spectacle in dumb amazement.

"Sorry to intrude gymnastics into the family circle, miss, but this was an acute case," explained Ben Brown.

"You are strangling him!" cried she, sharply.

"Just a hair," he blandly admitted.

At this moment still another person shot through the window, and suddenly as he came, the man-hunter recognized the boy who had given the eccentric name of Billy Blanket.

Very appropriate seemed the name, as he darted forward and laid his hand on Ben's arm, but the genuine Mexican *serape* he wore floated over and nearly concealed his face.

"In heaven's name!" he cried, "do not kill him!"

"He has outlived his usefulness."

"No, no! His usefulness has not yet begun. Let him live—let him live! Everything depends upon it."

"I didn't suppose the hinges of society hung on his back before, but, if you say so, live it is. I'm even willing to set him on his pegs again, only he must not forget his manners."

"I'll have your life!" hissed Parsons.

"Go away! You're a malevolent sort of an epidemic, I must say. Lie still, and reflect."

A mad exclamation passed the man's lips, and Ben compressed his throat until he seemed in actual danger.

Billy Blanket flung himself between the two men.

"Spare him—spare him!" he implored.

Sibyl seemed equally interested, but her arguments were of a different kind. She ran forward and caught a revolver from Billy Blanket's belt, at once turning it upon Brown.

He saw the danger, and averted it by the same means he had employed in the post-office affray. Up to his feet he came like a flash, at the same time raising Parsons; and then the man stood as a living shield.

"Spare the lead, or spoil this critter, miss," he calmly said.

Before she could answer, half a dozen boarders appeared on the scene, led by Hubert Lowell and Rufus Merritt, the partner of Parsons.

This, of course, served to prevent further fighting, and Parsons was soon at liberty. He was, however, covered with dust, and presented a sorry spectacle, withal; a fact often noticed after Buckshot Ben had finished conclusions with his victims.

A good deal of useless talk followed. Miss Roswell complained bitterly of Brown's "cowardly conduct," as she expressed it, and Parsons was at a white heat, and it soon became apparent that the difficulty could not be quietly settled.

Brown, himself, was not surprised; he would have bet his last dollar that the quarrel was forced upon him premeditatedly, and he meant to give as well as take.

"You must fight me, sir!" shouted Parsons.

"If the case is so acute as that, I have nothing to say. Go and wipe the froth off your mouth, buckle on your cinch and meet me somewhere by chance, the usual way."

"I shall send you a formal challenge within an hour."

"The return mail will do, but you can suit your convenience. Do nothing rash, or you may get in over your boots."

By this time Parsons and Merritt were moving back inside, escorting Sibyl, and Ben Brown was left with Hubert Lowell and others who gave him their sympathies in preference to the speculator from the East.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHALLENGE.

FREE from the presence of Parsons and his followers, all of Buckshot Ben's friends centered their gaze upon him; but he, as cool as ever, deliberately lighted his pipe and began smoking.

"This is serious," said Lowell, anxiously.

"To what do you refer?"

"Why, to the quarrel with Parsons."

"Oh! yes, I see. Well, I suppose it is serious, but we don't want our lives all comedy."

"You will fight him, then?"

"That's the present prospect, but I may get scared and run. Life's mighty uncertain. Suppose we go for a stroll, Lowell?"

The proposition was made to get rid of the other men, and they had started away when Ben suddenly paused.

"Wonder what's become of that Billy Blanket?" he said. "He appeared mysteriously and went away in the same style."

The man-hunter spoke the truth, for though Hubert looked through the hotel, there was no trace visible of the singular boy.

"I'd like to find him," said Buckshot, thoughtfully. "for I believe he knows something about this Parsons. It wasn't any ordinary case of philanthropy which impelled him to shield the speculator with his body. His voice shook a good bit and his eyes were wild. Then he said Parsons's usefulness had only just begun. I'd like that translated into plain United States. If he referred to the way the fellow was harass-

ing me, I would prefer to have its usefulness cut down in its youth."

"Do you think Parsons will challenge?"

"Undoubtedly."

"But he may think better of it."

"Pard, one word in your ear. This was no sudden freak on the part of our genial neighbors. I'll stake my head against a football that it was a put-up job with Parsons and Sibyl in the race. The man popped up mighty quick after the woman sounded the alarm, and then they ran neck and neck clean to the wire. Yes, it is a put-up job, but it may take them in over their boots."

"Why should they attack you?"

"That's what I want to know. Now, let me see; where is the motive? Ah! I have it! Billy Blanket is their friend, and I used the boy a leetle rough in the gulch the other night. Consequently, they hate me."

"But, you did not harm the boy," Lowell said, doubtfully.

"I rolled his arm a bit in my hand, scowled and threatened, and it may be he thought it was an acute case. Lord! you can't tell where a corn is till you tread on the foot."

Brown seemed so well satisfied with his theory that Lowell was also convinced, but as they reached the post-office the subject was dropped.

Entering, they found Ida once more on duty, and both were cordially greeted.

Ben glanced at the list of letters and saw that the name of John Marble had not been scratched out, and one glance from the girl was enough to answer his mute interrogatory.

The mysterious John had not yet appeared.

Buckshot, however, had eyes for other matters; he had learned that Lowell had a strong fancy for Ida; and, knowing that he was in the way of a private interview, he informed the lover that he had important business on hand, but would see him two hours later at the hotel.

Lowell understood and appreciated his kindness, and, left alone with Ida, improved the golden moments as far as was possible.

He was, however, filled with a little indignation, for he knew Ida often visited Sibyl Roswell, and he wished to know whether she would approve of what had occurred.

He told the whole story and found a most interested auditor. In fact, Ida was far more moved than he had expected, and the varying shades of her face surprised him.

"This is very singular," she said, "and I am filled with wonder at the result. Miss Roswell will regret it when she has had time to reflect."

"In my opinion, it is a deliberate game," said Lowell, bluntly.

"On whose part?"

"I believe the elements of hostility center on—Billy Blanket!"

"Impossible!" cried Miss Williston, impulsively.

"And why impossible?"

The question confused the girl and her eyes no longer met his in their honest, earnest way. She exhibited emotion for which he could not account, and for several moments was unable to frame a reply.

"Billy Blanket is not a person to deal in plots and underhand work," she finally said.

"You have a very high opinion of him," Lowell observed with a jealous thrill.

Her eyes met his quickly, for she had detected his inflection, and he believed there was reproach in her glance. Still, she was slow in answering, and her reply was evidently studied.

"Billy Blanket," she said, at last, "is not long for this world; I doubt if he lives through another year; but he is a person as kind as he is unfortunate. Misfortune has been his companion of late, but he would not do Mr. Brown an injury—I am sure of it."

"Why did he interfere in behalf of Parsons?"

"Not from friendship. I assure you. I can surmise his motives, but I am not at liberty to tell. I—I am somewhat acquainted with Billy, and I believe he—had an altogether different motive."

Lowell was a lover, and, being such, he was subject to jealousy, and as he saw the confusion of hesitancy of Miss Williston, he rushed blindly to a conclusion. Billy Blanket must be her favored suitor; or why should she thus defend him?

Believing thus, he did not prolong the interview to a very great length, but went out, sulkily, to take a stroll about the hills.

While there, he encountered Ben Brown, who was on his way back to the hotel.

"I've been over to the mine to see Ned Barton," he explained. "He is going to officiate as my second if there is a duel. I preferred him because, if you had filled the position, it would have betrayed our partnership too forcibly."

Lowell was not at all sorry to get rid of the unpleasant duty, and he then related what had occurred at the post-office; but, so thoroughly was he imbued with his unreasoning jealousy, he failed to convey any idea except that Ida had defended Billy Blanket.

"She seems to be deeply interested in him," observed Ben, judging principally by his imperfect information.

"A regular love affair," said Lowell, spitefully.

Buckshot made no answer, but as he remembered the youth and want of manliness which marked the young man in question, he could not believe that Ida Williston had taken a fancy for him.

"There may be another mystery on the ground," he reflected.

Reaching the hotel, Brown was soon approached by Merritt, the speculator partner of Julian Parsons, who looked unusually solemn.

"I am the bearer of a letter for you, Mr. Brown," he stiffly said.

"Charges prepaid?" Ben carelessly asked.

"You have only to read, sir," the speculator replied, as he extended the note.

The miner spread it out and calmly read. It was addressed to him in a bold hand, and, internally, ran as follows:

"SIR:—The gross insults heaped upon a lady by you, as well as my own treatment at your hands, demand satisfaction which can only be given among gentlemen in one way. I hereby challenge you to meet me according to the code of honor, and to fight to the death. My friend, Mr. Merritt, will act as my second. JULIAN PARSONS."

Ben read to the end without a change of countenance, and then looked thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"I'm pretty busy just at present," he said, "but I always like to help a lame dog over the fence, and I reckon I can accommodate your friend. Do you know Ned Barton?"

"I do, sir."

"Very well; go to him and he will try to carry one end of the log. What is your friend's taste in the way of boxes?"

"Of boxes?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, one of us will need such an article, of course, and I think it a good way to order one at mutual expense and have it fancy. Style goes a good ways, you know."

"We will think of that, later, sir. Have you a preference in regard to weapons?"

"Not a hair. The Gatling gun is very effective, but you can settle all that with Ned Barton. Let everything be as stylish as you can without getting in over your boots. Good-day, sir."

And Buckshot bowed his visitor out as politely as though he had been a lawyer and Merritt a rich client.

Once alone, he took up Parsons's letter and studied it, letter by letter.

"He is not 'Eagle Eye,'" observed the man-hunter, "though he may be John Marble. We will see what Ned Barton's trap will catch!"

From which it may be inferred that, indolent as Mr. Brown appeared, he was not letting his time go to waste.

By him, at least, Placer Pete was not forgotten.

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE TRACK.

DARKNESS fell without any news from Ned Barton, so, as Buckshot Ben had other business on hand, he secretly left the hotel and the town and made his way into the hills.

That afternoon, while returning from Barton's mine, he had made a singular discovery which he intended to follow up at once.

Half a mile from the village, he reached a wild and rugged gulch where nature seemed to have flung her material together without regard to form or symmetry.

Brown surveyed the scene closely, but, finding it to all appearances deserted, he moved forward to a point he had before fixed in his mind and paused before an opening in the rough face of the cliff.

Again he listened, but all was silent.

Then, from under his coat, he drew the same mask which had served him so well in his encounter with Williston, put it in place over his head, and then cautiously entered the dark opening.

Under his arm he bore a pine branch he had selected for a torch, but he did not yet deem it prudent to light it.

That day he had by mere chance discovered a cave, and the exploration he had made without a light had led him to believe that unusual interest was attached to it, so he had come again, and, this time, better prepared.

After advancing for about fifty feet, he paused and remained for some time listening carefully. He had reached the larger cave, and there he might expect to find the previous occupants, if anywhere.

All, however, remained silent, and he proceeded to light his torch. Its light arose, flickered, gathered strength and burned steadily, falling on black, bare walls of rock and floor of earth.

He made a circuit of the main room, which was about forty feet square, and then, convinced that he was alone, began a more careful search.

He examined the dirt under his feet and found it trodden hard nearly everywhere, and in other places were signs of frequent occupancy. Half-consumed torches, remnants of cigars and other refuse articles lay here and there, and all had a meaning.

From the main room Ben went into the nu-

merous niches that led off here and there, but he found nothing of importance, so he finally returned to the first room and sat down on a rock.

To him all that he had seen had a voice. Plainly, men came often to the cave and stayed long, and the most suspicious thing of all was the cigar refuse which was so plentiful. Most of the men of Shaker Gulch, who smoked at all, patronized common pipes, and those who could honestly afford to smoke costly cigars did not go into lonely caves to indulge their taste.

Consequently he had figured the case down to a fine point—this was the lair of robbers. This much decided upon, another question arose—why were the robbers not in their cave? He had found an easy answer; they were, for the most part, citizens of Shaker Gulch.

Some other points were not so easily settled, for he had never heard of road-agents about the Gulch, but it was on an important stage-line and only a comparatively short distance from where the Pacific Railroad curves around Salt Lake.

The luxuries of which he saw the remnants might have been taken from passing trains by secret or by open robbery.

It had just occurred to the explorer that he might be pausing too long to meditate, when his suspicion was turned into conviction.

There was a sound of voices near the cave entrance, and then he heard men pushing inside through the narrow passage.

We have before seen that Ben Brown was a man quick to execute a plan once formed, and in the present case he moved with remarkable celerity.

A quick leap took him to one of the lesser passages, and in a moment he was gone from sight, though, unluckily, being prevented from going from danger by the fact that, like all the sub-passages, his retreat was but a trap with one entrance.

He thrust his torch in a niche until the light was extinguished, and then prepared to observe his neighbors.

Coarse, rough voices were audible, but their words were not of importance. He heard at least three men, and one seemed to be lighting a torch.

A little later he succeeded, and, as he swung it about his head to increase the blaze, Brown improved the chance to use his eyes.

Four men were visible, rough fellows in mining suits, but strangers to him. They looked about the cave, and then one disappeared in a sub passage and soon brought out a box of cigars.

Just then other men arrived, and there were seven to put their hands in the box. Each soon had a cigar going, and then they sat down on a boulder and began talking carelessly.

Buckshot Ben was interested, but not greatly pleased. He had stumbled on a nest of rascals, but there was a chance that they might yet stumble upon him.

In case his proximity was suspected, there was no way of escape; his temporary refuge was a veritable trap.

One of the last comers he felt sure he had seen about the village, and he could no longer doubt the character of the gang—they were train-robbers, stage-robbers, or something of the kind.

Other men arrived until a dozen were present, but no business was transacted. One, who sported a watch, consulted its face, and they seemed to wait for some time or some person.

Which it was, the spy soon learned. Another man entered and the whole of his predecessors arose, as though in respect; sure sign that their chief had arrived.

Ben Brown looked, but the view was disappointing. He saw a tall, powerfully-formed man whose presence was impressive and commanding, but not a feature was visible. Over his head was a mask as large and impenetrable as the spy's own.

He greeted his men with a military gesture, and Buckshot could not avoid a start.

He had seen that gesture before; he had known another robber who had used that way of catering to the good will of his followers.

"Aha, Neba!" chuckled he, "that's where you give yourself dead away. You should have buried that habit in the grave with El Cuchillo, for now I have a most important clew in my hands; I am on the track!"

The masked leader collected his men about him and proceeded to business at once. He spoke steadily and earnestly; but in so subdued a voice that only an occasional word was audible to the listener. Many of these were suggestive, for he spoke of "trains," "the stage" and of "booty;" and they were directed to go armed to the teeth.

Buckshot Ben was not astonished. Some time before he had decided in his own mind that the ex-California outlaw was still in desperate business, and, certainly, the robbing of trains and stages was what might be expected of him.

Matters seemed to progress favorably; the leader talked and the others listened; and in every way it was apparent that his authority was supreme.

At last he ended his address, and then nearly all the men left the cave. Only the leader and two of his followers remained. He spoke to them, and they disappeared in a niche and soon came out masked like himself.

All looked to their weapons, and then the trio left the cave.

They had hardly passed the entrance when Ben Brown emerged into the cave proper. He knew that some secret work was afoot and he intended to know its nature.

He was gliding after them when a noise in front told him that some one was advancing, doubtless that one of the three was returning for something he had forgotten.

Buckskin pressed back against the wall and the man passed unsuspectingly, but at that moment a sudden idea flashed upon the spy. In the past he had often assumed a fictitious character—might he not now assume the role of the man in the cave?

Acting on the impulse of the moment he glided into the den and looked for the unknown. He saw him returning, unsuspecting of danger, and Ben prepared for action.

Like a tiger he sprung upon his prey, and it was one of his peculiarities to seldom fail in what he undertook. One hand closed around the fellow's neck, preventing an outcry, and at the same moment he cast him to the ground.

Then, tearing away his mask, he pricked him slightly with his knife.

"Be silent, or you die!" he whispered.

The man heard and obeyed. Just then he could not have called if he would, but the knife was a powerful argument, and he had seen his adversary's mettle.

Buckshot Ben plainly saw why the man had returned—a coil of slender rope was in his hand—and he hailed the discovery with joy.

In marvelously quick time he had cut off enough of the cord to suit his purpose and tied the outlaw's hands and feet with practiced skill. A gag was less easily found, so he improvised one from the fellow's own mask.

"Here I'll leave you," said Ben quietly, "and I hope you will appreciate my forbearance enough not to kick over the traces. Just be easy and you will come out of the crucible a-blooming."

With these words he left his prisoner and slouched out of the cave, his mask well in place, and the coil of rope in his hand.

"Well, you are slow as a snail!" said the leader testily.

"Some durned galoot mislaid ther strings," said Ben in a disguised voice.

It was a great risk to run, as he well knew, for he expected the deception to at once become plain; but luck or something else aided him and the leader merely growled and bade the others follow him in silence.

Ben was pleased at the last order, for it lessened his chances of discovery.

He soon perceived that their destination was the village, and he was filled with wonder to know what was afoot. He did not give a thought to his own danger, for he had faced two men before that day, and he was resolved to see the matter to an end.

The first of the cabins was reached and passed, and then in grim silence they went on until the rear of the American Hotel was reached.

Every moment Buckshot Ben grew more interested, and the climax approached when they paused beneath the window of his own room.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TEETH OF THE MAN-HUNTER.

BUCKSHOT BEN no longer had a doubt as to the object of this midnight expedition. He had previously known that Williston more than half suspected the identity of the man who had discomfited him in the post-office quarrel, and it was not strange that he should seek to put him out of the way.

A man who could announce to the world that he, the trusted postmaster of Shaker Gulch, was really El Cuchillo, the outlaw, was not a safe man to have at large.

"Proceed, Juan!" said the masked leader, quietly.

The third man produced a lasso from under his coat and closely surveyed the window. It was several feet above and the night was dark, but Ben Brown had no doubt as to the purpose in view or its partial success.

He saw that this man intended to cast his lasso, and the nature of the place above was greatly in his favor.

Backward swung Juan's arms and up went the rope, only to fall back to the ground. Five times the attempt was made, and then the lasso caught and held fast.

"Lose no more time," said the leader, impatiently, "but remember you must climb like cats. One rash sound will put your man on his guard. Have your weapons ready and strike to his heart when your chance comes."

"Si, senor," Juan promptly answered; and Ben Brown added a terse word to show that he heard.

It was the first time he had ever enlisted in a deliberate assassination, but, somewhat, he felt little pity for the man they had marked for death.

Juan seized the lasso and went up with great skill, his feet pressing against the wall. Reaching the window, which was open, he listened

long but finally disappeared inside and then turned and waved his hand.

"Now, Rock," said the leader.

Ben seized the lasso and began the ascent. His muscles were fully equal to the demand, but he could not equal the caution of his predecessor, though he reached the window and entered without mishap.

He had already marked out his course and intended to give the pair of assassins a surprise.

"Quietly, *camarada*, quietly!" whispered Juan. "It is said that this fellow is a demon, and we must not let him get at us. Have you the cords?"

"Yes," Ben answered.

"It is not likely they will be needed. If nothing goes wrong, I will stab him to the heart."

"Still, something may go wrong, my gentle Juan," Buckshot insinuated.

"Speak softly! Now, follow me, and be ready to seize the man if he struggles after the blow."

"Ay, ay; I'm right on deck," Ben observed.

They crept toward the bed and Buckshot smiled at his companion's caution. It is so seldom that a man participates in an elaborate attempt to murder himself that the affair was duly appreciated.

Juan reached the bed and, raising his knife, looked for the form of the doomed man.

Buckshot Ben's time had come; it would not do to delay any longer. He had drawn his revolver and reversed it as a club, and with a sure and heavy stroke he struck the Mexican on the head.

He was a man who seldom struck in vain, and the result did not surprise him. Down went the would-be assassin like a log, and had not Ben caught him, he would have struck heavily on the floor.

Another moment and he was lying flat on his back, on the bed, with his own knife at his throat.

"Utter one word and I'll blow out your brains!" said the victor, coolly.

There was no response, not even a movement, and it needed no further examination to tell that he was senseless.

So far, all had gone well, and Ben continued his work with quickness and skill. The cords he had brought were wound about the fellow's wrists and ankles, and then his downfall was completed by the addition of a gag improvised from a towel.

Buckshot then proceeded to the second part of his work, and, going to the window, balanced himself and leaped lightly out.

His movements seemed to throw the masked leader into something of a panic.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Hev you a pistol?" Ben demanded.

The leader drew his revolver and then suddenly paused, as though struck by the peculiarity of the request.

"What do you want of it?" he asked.

Buckshot gave a practical answer. One sweep of his hand sent the weapon several yards away, and at the same time the man hunter caught at his companion's mask and tore it entirely away.

Seba Williston stood revealed, though, somehow, his form seemed to lack the rotundity which had marked it as being suited to official honors.

"Hallo, Seba! how's the folks?" the man-hunter asked with a chuckle.

A mad, hissing oath broke from the postmaster's lips, and out from his belt came his knife, his only remaining weapon.

"Dog!" he cried, "you shall—"

Right there he paused, and the hand which had drawn the knife also came to a sudden halt; Ben Brown, with his usual coolness, had thrust out a revolver so that its muzzle almost touched the postmaster's nose.

"Don't do it, Seba, don't! There is something dreadful to me about cold steel, and I must ask you to throw open the stove door and ease off on your heat. You observe, Seba, that I hold the drop and can carry a boom if I choose."

"Ben Brown?" muttered the baffled outlaw.

"He is up above with Juan's knife in his body. What had he done to you, Seba? Was he, too, an acquaintance of yours on the Santa Barbara trail? Some day, I dare say you'll be trying to wing me, too."

"Enough of idle words," curtly said the postmaster, who was once more cool. "Do not deny your identity. I suspected it the night you visited me at the post-office; I know it now. You are Ben Brown, and—and—"

"Well? Fire out the whole statement."

"It is war to the death between us. What do you want?"

"Spoken with the dignity and firmness born to El Cuchillo. Well, my festive cutthroat, I admit that we are enemies to the death, but I wouldn't kill you to-night for a fortune. I want to see the stake you are playing for before I trip you up. I know a little about you now, and I can see that you are doing well even for El Cuchillo. As a thieving postmaster and a leader of train-robbers you ought to be as well fixed as when you took toll around Santa Barbara."

"Ben Brown, you know too much," said Williston, in a voice husky with impotent rage.

"Enough to hang you, Seba," was the quiet reply.

"Still, you will never do it. Fool! are you mad enough to believe that you can play with El Cuchillo? I don't remember you in the old days, but since I hang so heavily on your mind, you must know that El Cuchillo is a hard fighter."

"Just a hair!" Buckshot admitted.

"Very well; now hear me speak: You have said that you will play with me as a cat with a mouse; I say that one of us will die before to-morrow night. Do you suppose I will rest under the hanging sword like a clod? Fool! fool! it is war to the death between us and I will shoot you at sight."

"Possible? Well, Seba, you've blown your bugle with a healthy lung; now load your Smith & Wesson and see how you pan out on the trigger. Walk right up to the feed-trough; but look out and not get in over your boots!"

"What have you done with my men?"

"One of them is in your cave, tied up to keep, and the other is enjoying a nap in my bed."

"The cave! Have you been there?"

"Yes, a few."

Williston almost strangled with impotent rage. No coward was he, but a hard and fearless fighter who feared no man; and had he been equally armed, he would have moved for a settlement of the feud then and there. Still, he was not a fool, and the unwavering revolver before him was not to be disregarded.

"You dare not fight me on equal terms," he huskily said.

"You mean that I will not."

"Coward!"

"How?"

"I say you are a coward—a coward!"

"Oh! I misunderstood you. Go on!"

The man-hunter was still laughing.

"Then you will not fight me?"

"Not to-night, Seba, thank you. Some day we will meet and square the account. I've got a pretty heavy charge against you, and when we balance the books people will think an earthquake has broken loose. It will be an acute case; the settlement means death for one of us."

The even tones were as light and careless as ever, except that now and then a slight steel-like ring crept in, and proved a deep, fixed purpose, which Williston did not fail to see.

"I accept your decision," he said, quietly, "but to-morrow will be the day of settlement."

"Possibly, though I doubt it; I have a fancy for running this concert myself. Well, Seba, are you ready to go home?"

CHAPTER XVII.

BUCKSHOT BEN SEEKS A REFEREE.

"WHAT of my man up stairs?" Williston asked.

"I'll release him and send him to the cave to free his partner. Your crowd is broken up, and in the mud over their boots, but I'll do my best to send you through a blooming. Go home, Seba, and load up your cannon for your sortie to-morrow."

"Use your taunts plentifully while you can, but you may be sure I will prepare for action. It's death for one of us; bear that in your mind."

With this parting warning, the postmaster hurried away toward his house, while Buckshot Ben was nearly as prompt in climbing back to his room.

He found the Mexican, Juan, once more conscious, and he at once proceeded to have a serious talk with him. The fellow was already frightened, and when Ben had drawn his knife suggestively across his neck a few times, with the edge just right for a sensation as though he was being shaved, the man-hunter demanded a full account of the masked band.

Juan weakened and confessed; and then Brown found his suspicions verified. The gang worked railroad trains, stages, and whatever else came in their way, being divided into several detachments, with Seba Williston at the head of all—at least, Ben knew him to be the leader, though Juan swore that not one of the gang knew the identity of the man.

To them, he was simply Captain Duke.

"What had I better do with you now, Juan?" the man-hunter asked, anon.

"For the Virgin's sake, don't kill me!" implored the Mexican.

"You came here to kill me."

"It was because Captain Duke ordered it."

"By which you imply that you are an angel, but the fact that you are one of Duke's lambs weighs against you. I ought to kill you, Juan."

"Ah! mercy, mercy! *Madre de Dios!* spare me, senior. I will be your slave; I swear it! Ah! senior, dear, good senior, spare me!"

"Will you act as my ally in the camp of the enemy if I do so?"

"I will; I swear—"

"I wouldn't if I was you. Well, Juan, I am going to spare you, and you have your choice of three courses. Serve me, ignore me entirely or

flee the country and save your skin from all who know you here."

The Mexican stood erect, full in the light of the lamp, and his features moved perceptibly. Buckshot Ben watched him keenly, noted each change of countenance. There was a perceptible struggle, but at last a firm look settled on his rather attractive features.

"I will remain with the band and serve you," he declared.

"Remember that in so doing you dare the wrath of Captain Duke, *alias* Seba Williston, one of the most merciless men between the Mississippi and the Pacific. I know him of old, and I tell you fairly that his heart is of stone. Leave Idaho, Juan, and you are safe from Captain Duke and from me."

Brown spoke earnestly, for he could not believe that this man understood the danger he was about to dare. Should his double-dealing be discovered, his life would be the forfeit.

"I will not," the Mexican firmly said. "A minute ago I was groveling at your feet, an abject coward. Now, I am a man, and if—if you will give me your hand, I'll fight the battle through with you."

Buckshot Ben was more than ever surprised, and the sudden change naturally made him suspicious, but he gave his hand, nevertheless, and then Juan said good-night, slipped from the window and soon disappeared in the darkness.

It was too late to see Ned Barton that night, so, though anxious to know what had been done about the prospective duel with Julian Parsons, the man hunter sat down to smoke and think before going to bed.

Little by little he was picking up the threads of the various cases which interested him at the Gulch, and he believed the rest would soon follow.

After a while he secured his window, retired, and soon fell asleep, but at daylight he was out of the hotel and on his way to the cabin of Ned Barton, the mine superintendent.

He found that young man eating breakfast, and soon learned that Rufus Merritt had called on him as the second of Parsons, and that all arrangements for the duel had been completed.

"You are to fight in Dutch Canyon this evening, one hour before sunset," added Barton.

"Does that suit you?"

"To a hair. Did you put the agreement in writing?"

"No. Merritt refused to sign any such paper. I urged it on him, as you wished, but he fought shy, and it was no go."

"What reason did he give for refusing?"

"He said it was boys' play, and he would be hanged if he would do it. I watched his face, as you desired, while talking, and I saw a look which seemed to me to say, 'Brown wants to carry this case to law, but he can't catch me in this trap.' Maybe I was wrong, but that's my solution."

"I believe you read well, Ned, and I reckon he was afraid of getting in over his boots. Well, I'll be on hand for the target-shoot, though I won't kill Parsons."

"You won't kill him?" repeated Barton in amazement.

"No."

"And why not?"

"Because he may be more useful living than dead."

Brown spoke the words carelessly, and then to his mind came a recollection of a sentence uttered by Billy Blanket when interfering in behalf of Parsons, one which expressed almost the same idea.

"His usefulness has not yet begun," Billy Blanket had said; and as the words came back to the man-hunter he pondered on them more fully.

"I can't see what good you can get out of him," said Barton, in evident disgust; "and if I was you I would shoot to kill."

"Well, I mean to put a ball through his right arm, hitting him just hard enough to put him off the stage for a few tableaux, you know."

The explanation was hardly satisfactory to the mine-superintendent, but he recognized Buckshot Ben's right to engineer his own affairs, and said little more.

Ben soon left him and returned to the village, proceeding at once to the post-office.

The hour was early, and Mr. Seba Williston was just putting the office in order after opening the door, when a step sounded behind him, and he turned to see who had called at that time in the morning.

He needed no introduction to the gentleman who had entered, but the color retreated from his face, despite his nerve, as he saw Ben Brown standing with a pair of cocked revolvers leveled at his head.

True, the man-hunter was smiling carelessly, but, naturally, Williston saw only the dark muzzles.

"Hallo, Seba, old man! How are you?" was Ben's genial greeting. "I thought I'd call around this morning and see if you had any mail for me."

The color came back to the postmaster's face, and with a furious, defiant look, but he firmly believed his last hour had come. He had announced that he would shoot Brown at sight be-

fore sunset, and he could not see why any man should be such a fool as to fail to improve the drop when he had a clean sweep.

As for himself, his revolver was five feet distant.

"Curse you! you've got me now!" he growled.

"Just a hair," the other acknowledged.

"You see, I came on business, and I was so afraid you would insist on taking me to breakfast that I put out my bow guns."

"Sneer on!" hissed Williston, looking at his revolver wishfully.

"See here, Seba, I'm going to fight a duel tonight, just before Old Sol slips down the sunset netes, and I came to ask you to act as referee. You see, it is to be a bloodthirsty affair, with a prospect of some technicalities to squabble over, and I want a man for referee that is eighteen-carat gold, you see. Now, Seba, knowing you to be grand, square and upright in every way, I offer you the post. Now, my good man, don't edge any nearer to your shooting-iron. You might put your foot in the mud over your boots."

Williston, finding his pet scheme frustrated, settled back into a chair with a growl.

"You've got cheek enough!" he observed.

"Why, wouldn't you serve?"

"No!"

"Can you recommend any good man who will?"

"Oh! go and shoot yourself!" roared Williston. "I'm tired of this farce. You hold the drop, and if you want to mark me, why, blaze away. If not, get out of this office!"

His sudden confidence was in itself suspicious, but Buckshot Ben heard and saw other signs worth noticing.

First of all, he had seen the postmaster's eyes waver and his face light up with a gleam of joy, and then, close behind him, he heard soft footsteps.

The situation flashed upon him at once, and he knew he was in danger; but he was equal to the requirements of the occasion. It took a sharp man to catch Ben Brown napping.

Like a flash he wheeled, and just in time, for a long, ugly-looking knife was raised above his back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DUELISTS MEET.

It was Deaf Dan, the young half-breed, who had thus appeared on the scene. He had entered the door unsuspecting; that anything was wrong, but one glance was enough to show him that his friend and master was in trouble.

With Dan, to think was to act—and his was an elastic conscience. A human life, more or less, mattered little to him.

He had no revolver, but he at once drew his knife and began creeping forward; and, as the keen blade was raised, there was a large prospect of trouble for Buckshot Ben.

A moment later, however, he wheeled, and the "blizzard" struck Deaf Dan hard and heavy. One sweep of Ben's arm knocked the knife from his hand, when it fell and remained sticking in the floor; and then the same potent hand dashed Dan to the floor as though he had been a feather.

For a moment the man-hunter had held both his revolvers in one hand, but he now placed them as before, and with one in each hand, and his foot planted on the breast of the half-breed, he faced Williston again.

He was just in time. Seba had not failed to improve the chance offered him—only the strange quickness of the miner had saved his life—and his fingers were almost at his revolver when that clear, cool voice broke the silence.

"Raise that revolver and I'll shoot to kill!" warned Buckshot Ben.

A tableau ensued. The man-hunter kept his place, his revolvers without a waver, and Deaf Dan, awed into quiet, was content to lie under his heel and make no sign; while Williston, his hand outstretched for the revolver he dared not seize, stood in baffled rage.

"Mr. Postmaster, have you a letter for me?" drawled Buckshot Ben.

With a curse, Williston started from his position. Once more he was thwarted by this cool stranger, who seemed to see all that was passing behind him, and he knew he must make the best of it.

"Would you kill that boy?" he demanded.

"It would be a mercy to the public at large, but I reckon I'll let the young assassin go on until he gets hit in the stomach by Judge Lynch. That's where you are leading him, Seba, sure as sin. Get up, my bold red cut-throat!"

Deaf Dan arose, and stood scowling at him in a malevolent way. He made an ugly ally for the *ci-devant* El Cuchillo, as Brown well knew, and yet he would not use his advantage.

"I'll leave you now," he said, with perfect good humor. "Maybe I'll drop in again after dinner. So long!"

And then he walked backward to the door, watching master and servant, but safe from all molestation, when he met several other men coming in with letters for the mail.

He went at once to the American Hotel, where he found the bar-tender ringing what seemed to be a five-dollar gold piece on the counter, but Brown's quick ear at once detected a flaw in the sound.

"Bad, isn't it?"

"It's roight yez be, sure as pr'aching. Some galoot has passed it on me, but may dhe Ould Nick tread on me hales if I don't pass it ag'in."

"Where did you get it?"

"Now yez ask too much, but I'll thry ivery coin I get after dhis. It's two that war bad I've taken in dhis wake, an' several before. It sames to me somebody is a-warkin' dhe town."

"If you have another offered, let me know and tell me who did the business, will you?"

Tim promised, and then the man-hunter went on to his room.

He had been impressed by the man's assertion that bogus money was so abundant, and his thoughts went flowing in a new channel.

The day passed uneventfully, the entire afternoon being spent by Ben and Lowell in rambling about the hills. Whether it was this fact or something else, Ben did not know, but Williston did not make his appearance to finish their feud.

At the appointed hour he went to Dutch Canyon, accompanied by Ned Barton, to do his share in the "affair of honor" with Julian Parsons.

They were first on the ground and found comfortable quarters on a rock to await the coming of the rival party.

Only a short time had passed when Parsons and Merritt appeared. Both were cool, but Brown could see subdued hostility in their faces.

"I've been looking for you all the afternoon," said Merritt, abruptly.

"Is that so? Anything forgotten?"

"Well, the fact is—Miss Roswell—that is, we—well, somebody has blundered. Miss Roswell has said to us that she is convinced that she was wrong, and she has been in a panic all the afternoon."

"Right or wrong, there is no occasion for a panic," Buckshot coolly said.

"It's a woman's way, you know. She feels very badly and has been weeping a good deal."

"That's bad."

The man-hunter was eying the two men sharply from under his drooping lashes. He foresaw a back-down, but he could not understand the cause.

He read insincerity in every look and tone of the men. Merritt did not speak heartily, but his words were said with an ill-grace, and he mentally compared the pair to panthers robbed of their prey.

What was the cause of the back-down?—if one there was.

He did not believe Parsons a coward, nor did he think Sibyl Roswell was a woman to shed tears about small matters.

As he had read her when at the hotel, she was proud, selfish and worldly—perhaps, worse.

"Consequently," continued Merritt, with perceptible ill grace, "she sends you a full apology for all she said."

"And I," added Parsons, stepping forward, "also beg your pardon, and—and—it'll be a long day before I take up another woman's quarrel!"

Ned Barton stood astonished, but Buckshot Ben, though busily thinking, preserved an outward composure which seemed beyond the power of anything to shake.

"We are all liable to blunders," he smilingly said.

"If it can honorably be done, I wish this duel to be off," resumed Merritt.

"Why not? It is easier than fighting," Ben returned.

And so it came about that, after some further talk, the four men shook hands in outside good will and Parsons and Merritt disappeared in the direction of the town.

Ned Barton stood astonished, but his principal calmly lighted his pipe and sat down upon a rock.

"What in the world does it mean?" explosively demanded Barton, finding power of speech at last.

"Isn't it plain enough?"

"Can it be Parsons is a coward? I always took him to be a bold fellow."

"So he is. Of course, Barton, there is a reason for all this. Did you see how sulky those fellows looked all the while? Parsons was long in to get at me, but some secret power held him back."

"By George! I had the same idea."

"The change of mind and tea s of Sibyl Roswell are moonshine. Barton, this quarrel was deliberately forced upon me, and because those people either hate or fear me. I have my theory in the case, but I'll hold it for a while. As for the motive they had in backing down, I'm up a stump; but I'll get at the whole business soon, unless some of my enemies send me across the divide."

"Have you other enemies here?"

"A few. Fact is, I've got into a hornet's nest by coming to Shaker Gulch, but I hold the ribbons still and hope to carry the caravan through."

If I fall by the way, carve the board, 'Buckshot Ben, he died hard!'"

The man-hunter arose with more than usual quickness and they went back to the village and to the hotel, where Ben proceeded to interview his friend, Tim of the bar.

"Who has visited up-stairs, to-day?" he asked.

"Divil a wan, Bin."

"Think again."

"Now yez spake iv it, I remimber dhat Miss Ida Williston was dhere."

"Well, on whom did she call?"

"Oh! sure an' it must hev been Miss Razwell. Dhev are dhe bist ov friends."

"Did you see them together?"

"No, but I heerd dhem up in dhe west chamber."

That was all that Tim could tell, but it was enough to decide one point in Ben Brown's mind. Ida Williston had been the cause of the apology delivered by Sibyl and Parsons.

"What was her motive?" wondered the man-hunter, when once more alone. "She knows, or ought to know, that I am capable of caring for myself, and it must have been something unusual that made her take such a course. Maybe I am wrong, but I will soon know. She and I have shaken hands on a partnership, and she ain't the woman to go back on a pledge."

At this point he noticed a note on his table, and tearing it open, found Ida Williston's name at the end. It was a request that he would meet her outside the village that night, and he needed no reflection to decide whether he would go.

"I'll be there, and I only hope that amiable putative parent of hers will not suspect anything and drop in on us with his six. It would make matters unpleasant—just a hair."

CHAPTER XIX.

TROUBLE FOR IDA.

UNKNOWN to any of the party who met on the dueling ground, there had been other witnesses of the affair than were billed for places in the drama. Even before Buckshot Ben and his second arrived, two persons had been crouching in a rocky recess, and they seemed to await some event with a painful interest.

These two persons were Ida Williston and young Billy Blanket.

The latter had fairly earned a reputation of being a man of mystery. He appeared, now and then, as suddenly as a jack from a box, but when he went off the scene, his retreat was not so well known.

Ben Brown, who had grown interested in him from the time he interfered to save Julian Parsons from punishment, had often wondered where the boy kept himself, but his abiding place was a mystery.

If any one knew where he lived, it seemed as though Ida Williston could claim the honor. The association of the two partook of the remarkable. They had met oddly, Ida had championed his cause when he attempted to stab Lowell, and from that time they had been friends.

Why was it? What interest had the girl in Billy Blanket? He was not a person calculated to win a sensible young lady's heart. He was weak and effeminate of body, apparently cowardly, he had once tried to figure as an assassin, and there seemed a chance to doubt that he was in his right mind.

Yet this young man was near the proposed dueling-ground, with Ida Williston for a companion, and they seemed to be on the best of terms.

Billy was clad as usual, with his *sombrero* and *serape*; a Mexican in dress, an American in all other external appearance.

From their cover, the two watched the meeting and parting of the duelists, but they did not stir until Ben Brown and his friend had followed the other men to the village.

The result of the affair seemed to please the watchers, and they talked earnestly for some time.

Billy Blanket, however, suddenly remembered something else.

"You have barely time to go home and quiet any suspicions Williston might feel," he said. "It lacks but two hours of the time when you are to meet Mr. Brown."

"Perhaps I had better go," Ida admitted. "I do not want to arouse the suspicions of that man. Oh! Billy, you do not know the horror of the life I lead. No words can express my disgust for my situation—for him, for myself!"

"Be brave," said the boy. "It will all come right in the end."

"You have faith?"

"It is all that keeps me alive."

"I am stronger than you, but less confident. Sometimes I feel almost sure that only disappointment is ahead of me. Perhaps Egbert Hadley is dead, perhaps—perhaps his show of affection for me was a sham."

"No, no!" cried Billy—"do not say that; do not doubt. Have faith until the last hope is gone. It is my sole comfort—it is the one thing that binds me to life."

"But, why did Egbert disappear so mysteriously? If he truly cared for me, he would not

have left me as he did, unless— Well, I sometimes think he is dead. Again, I often think of his fits of gloom and sorrowful tenderness, and then I fear that—that there may have been the shadow of a crime over him."

"Ida!" cried the boy, reproachfully. "Do not let me hear you speak thus again. Would you thus wrong one who has loved you?"

"I am not sure I am wronging him," the girl answered, an unusual hardness in her tones. "The conviction grows upon me that I never really saw Elbert Hadley's heart."

"Still, I command you to withhold your judgment until Mr. Brown has heard your story. Somehow, I feel sure that he can help you. He is brave, shrewd, and noble; he will do all he can."

"I do not doubt it."

The strangely-assorted pair had stood until the shadows of twilight had gathered and deepened until surrounding objects grew dim; and thus it was that, as they talked so earnestly, they saw nothing of the other forms moving near the spot.

They did not see the rough men creeping toward them, skulking from boulder to boulder; they knew nothing of the hostile eyes bent upon them; and yet danger for both was steadily approaching.

Men, wild, lawless and rude of dress and look, were playing the role of wolves and advancing on their prey.

The awakening came at last. Out from behind the boulders sprung the prowlers, and in a moment more Ida and her friend were in their midst.

Both uttered a cry which mingled as one, but they could neither flee or shrink back; they were in the midst of their enemies.

A series of short, chuckling laughs arose as the men beheld their alarm, and lawless words fell freely around them.

"Hebe an' a hybrid," said one, facetiously.

"A pair o' doves out late o' night."

"See ther youngster shiver!"

"Toss him over ther cliff an' save ther beauty fur our guardian angel!"

These were among the more refined of their remarks, but in every word and gesture Ida Williston saw hostility and danger for her.

She caught Billy Blanket's arm and would have departed, but the strangers barred her way.

"Let me pass, please," she said, in a voice which trembled perceptibly.

"Not yet, nor in that way, my angel," answered one of the ruffians. "We won't ask you to stay but a moment here, but your way lies up there!"

He pointed to the upper peaks.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Simply that we are hosses that never refuse our feed when we see it. Up there where the eagle has his nest among the cliffs, our home may also be found. You are to go with us and be our queen."

"Never!" she exclaimed.

"That's what the raven said," the man laughed, mockingly. "Come, my angel, don't be restive now. You are to go with us, and no power on earth can prevent it."

Their purpose was made plain, and in a moment more her hand arose holding a revolver.

"Stand back!" she cried. "Let us pass, or—"

She had made her mistake in pausing to give warning to such brutes. According to the customs of the West, she would have been justified had she fired at sight; but with the danger revealed, the fellows were not easily frustrated.

Even in the midst of her warning a hand caught her wrist and then the revolver was wrested from her grasp.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the mocking leader, "the young bird's wings are clipped. As a revolver pard you will never be a success; you had better devote your attention to 'woman's sphere.' Come, men, let's get out of this. Up and away!"

Rude hands fell upon Ida and Billy Blanket, and though they endeavored to cling to each other, they were torn apart and held fast in the arms of their captors. Once Ida screamed, but a broad hand was clapped over her mouth and a warning hissed in her ear.

No further delay was made. The men, who were seven in number, made sure of their prisoners and the gulch was soon deserted. Ida was compelled to walk between two brawny fellows, each of whom held her by an arm, and her pleadings fell on unheeding ears.

Plainly she had fallen among those who were as rough of heart as they were externally, and as no one would explain their destination or purpose, she soon relapsed into silence.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw Billy Blanket following with a composure which surprised her. She had thought him weak and cowardly, but he had suddenly arisen superior to his troubles and trod the path of captivity with a bold exterior.

Their way was up the rugged mountain side, and though, from some motive, the men aided her considerably, their progress was so comparatively rapid that she soon began to grow breathless.

In fact the retreat partook much of the nature

of a flight, and she could not fail to see that the men wished to leave Shaker Gulch behind as soon as was possible.

Wondering who they were, she looked closely at their bearded faces, but none of them seemed familiar. She had thought the faces of all the men of the Gulch were known to her, and a sudden suspicion flashed upon her. From time to time, crimes had been committed at or near the village, and, in some cases, men had been hanged or punished on suspicion; but it now occurred to her that the heart of the mountain might hold men who were not openly known to the Gulch.

Only in this way could she explain the journey up the mountain-side.

Granted that this was so, why had she been seized? There were several explanations for the act, but as no one stood out with particular prominence, she mentally decided that it was a matter of money.

Her putative father was supposed to be the richest man in Shaker Gulch, and as such a plan might have been formed to extort money from him in the shape of a ransom.

The girl's reflections were abruptly interrupted as the party came to a halt, and then the leader moved to Ida's side and lifted his hat with strained politeness.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE OUTLAW'S CAVE.

IDA was in no way reassured by this burlesque on good breeding, for she really feared this bland, mocking young fellow more than she did his ruder appearing companions, but the sneer was gone from his voice when he spoke.

"I'm afraid we are tiring you, young lady," he said, "but, if so, it may be a slight relief to know that we are near our journey's end."

"Where are we going?" she abruptly asked.

"You will see very soon," he replied after a brief hesitation. "I do not care to reveal too much just at present, for you know when men play with fire they should handle the coals lightly."

"May I ask why we are brought here?"

"Well, you are treading on delicate ground now, and I would rather not say anything about it. Wait a little, and when we reach the cave—"

He stopped suddenly.

"Ah! when we reach the cave!" repeated Ida quickly.

"Never mind; the word slipped out unawares, but it makes no difference. It only hastens the knowledge. All I care to say now is that you will be well treated. Who is this boy?"

He looked at Billy Blanket with a less pleasant air.

"My friend," Ida answered.

"Do you mean your lover?"

"Bah! The idea is absurd; he is but a boy. No, he is not my lover, but he is a relative and, as such, I hope he will be well treated."

"I reckon we can oblige you," the man replied looking keenly at Billy.

The march was resumed and Shaker Gulch soon lay far below them. They were in the heart of the mountain, a place always supposed to be deserted and rarely trod by man; where there was nothing to tempt either the gold-seeker, the hunter or the admirer of the beautiful.

Before Ida suspected it, they had entered a cave and, emerging from a passage, stood in a sizable chamber of Nature. Roof and walls were of rock, and it seemed like an amphitheater built for some such lawless band as this.

At one side was a smoldering fire, but this was at once replenished and torches were lighted and thrust in crevices.

The prisoners stood among their captors during this interval, and all seemed to await the illumination, but it was a pause of more than ordinary interest to Ida Williston.

Standing there, with the men carelessly talking among themselves, four words were suddenly and cautiously whispered in her ear:

"Be brave; have hope!"

She was not cool enough to hear words so significant and unexpected without a start, and all eyes were at once fixed upon her; but she was shrewd enough to try to quiet any suspicions she might have aroused.

"The place is like a tomb; I am cold!" she said, shivering, and looking at the leader.

"It is a little chilly around the edges, but I will soon make that all right," he carelessly said.

Ida saw that her explanation had been believed, and she at once looked for the man who had whispered.

The whole party stood near and the light fell full upon their faces, but though she looked at them sharply she could not tell who had spoken. No significant look, such as might be expected, was visible, and she was greatly perplexed.

She turned away wondering if she had imagined the words. "Be brave; have hope!" Had they really been but a fancy, or had she a friend among them?

Her thoughts were interrupted by the appearance, from the interior of the cave, of another person—a negress, black as coal and muscular as the brawny men themselves.

The leader met her half-way and talked for a while, and then he came to the prisoners and directed them to follow; after which they were led to a smaller rock-room where a bright fire was blazing and the roughness of the place was lessened by a carpeting of blankets on the floor.

"I'll leave you here with Venus," the leader said, indicating the negress, "but you need not waste breath in arguing with her. She is as loyal to me as the mountain's foundation. In the morning I will see you again."

"Are we to be retained here?" asked Ida.

"For the present, you are, but you need have no fear. Venus is the guardian of this part of my domain and no one else will intrude."

With the last word he turned and went out, and the prisoners were alone with the negress.

Ida looked at her critically, and though she plainly saw that there was no sign of womanly feeling in the dusky face, at once began to talk to her.

It was a one-sided conversation, for not even by a look did the negress show that she heard. Deaf she certainly was not, for she had talked with the outlaw leader, but to the voice of innocence her ears were closed.

An hour passed on uneventfully. The prisoners sat on a bench, side by side, and Venus crouched on the floor near the fire. She did not look toward the prisoners, but, looking into the fire, seemed like one sleeping with wide-open eyes.

Ida dared not sleep and Billy Blanket was thoroughly awake. He had at last arisen above the timidity he had at first shown and seemed as manly as his years would warrant, yet he was unable to show his latent resolution.

The situation had been thoroughly discussed by the two, but they saw no loophole for escape.

Silence had fallen between them and Ida was looking vaguely at the bleak wall when something suddenly fell in her lap. It was of sufficient weight to make its coming very perceptible, but she happily avoided a start and looked to see what had so strangely come.

To her great surprise, it proved to be a small piece of stone with a folded paper attached by means of a string.

The color rushed to her face, impelled by a sudden hope, but she looked first for the source from which it had come.

At the mouth of the passage connecting the room with the main chamber, she saw a man standing with his hand on his lips; but he no sooner saw that he was observed than he made a warning gesture and retired.

Ida's heart was throbbing violently, and she glanced anxiously toward the negress. Luckily, the woman's back was toward the unknown man, while Ida's own coolness had prevented any alarm.

Billy Blanket, too, had shown self-control, and though both believed that there was at last hope, they did not venture to speak a word.

Carefully the girl unfolded the paper. A few lines of writing were scratched upon it, and though the spelling was most wretched, she had no difficulty in reading them.

"DEER SENORITA:—Don't give up in despair, for you have a friend near who will do his best to help you out. Keep up your courage and keep your eyes open and you may be out of here before morning. Be silent as the grave!"

That was all for no signature was appended, but it was enough to bring a new light into her eyes. After all, she was not alone and friendless in the den of iniquity, though she had no idea who was thus interesting himself in her behalf.

The man she had seen looked like a Mexican, and other facts went to confirm the theory. She was addressed as "senorita," and the penmanship of the note was far superior to the spelling; all went to indicate that it might be the work of one better acquainted with a foreign than the American language.

Billy Blanket read the note at the same time, but not yet did they dare to speak. Ida realized the importance of destroying the paper, but, as no means were visible, she finally rolled it into small space and consigned it to the bottom of her pocket.

This much accomplished, she turned to Billy Blanket.

"Do you think there is really ground for hope?" she asked.

"I do not know. Our friend seems in earnest, but I do not see how he is to aid us without allies. Probably the whole band is against him, and this black woman is like a watch-dog."

"She is the worst obstacle of all."

"I have been wondering if we can in any way overpower her."

"I see no hope."

"Doubtless you are right, but I have a knife concealed in my coat which the outlaws did not find. I am tempted to risk all in a combat with her."

"Abandon the idea, in mercy's name. We would be no more than children in her hands."

"Weapons make the weak equal to the strong," said Billy Blanket, steadily. "I do not fear this woman, and if you will give your consent, I will attack her."

Ida looked more closely at the man. She felt the floor on the floor, the woman still gazed into the fire and looked like a highly colored statue.

The attitude, however, did not hide the breadth of her shoulders or the swelling muscles of her arms, and it was evident that Venus would make a bad adversary.

"No, no," said Ida, "I feel sure that such a move would ruin our hopes. Let us remain quiet and trust to our unknown friend."

Perhaps it was the best way, but both found it hard to wait as the minutes wore on and they saw their ally no more.

Anon, however, they noticed a change in the appearance of Venus. Her position remained the same, but her eyes had closed and she seemed sleeping in an upright position. They could not tell whether such was the fact or not, for in all things the negress seemed peculiar.

Somewhat later, however, the stranger appeared in the passage, making the same signs of caution. He was at once seen, for they were watching the spot. He looked sharply at Venus and then motioned for them to come to him.

Very willingly they obeyed, but with all possible caution, and scarcely a rustle betrayed their movements.

Across the floor they went, always looking at Venus, but she did not stir. Ida almost believed that the throbbing of her own heart would betray them, but they reached the side of their ally without an alarm.

CHAPTER XXI.

CAPTAIN DUKE.

As they neared the unknown, Ida saw that he was beyond doubt a Mexican. Features and dress both went to prove it, and for a moment she hesitated, knowing, as she did, the proverbial treachery of the race, but she did not see how she could make her situation any worse.

The man did not cease to make cautioning signs, and as they neared him he began to retreat, still motioning them forward. Then they saw that his hand was on a knife and his gaze upon Venus, and they gained fresh confidence.

A few yards further and a curve in the passage hid the negress from sight, and then the guide stopped.

"Caramba! that was a narrow escape!" he said, with a sigh of relief. "I had nerved myself to attack Venus and trust to luck, but, *mira!* for once she sleeps at her post. Praise the Virgin that it is so!"

"Can we escape?" Ida anxiously asked.

"We can try," he said, cautiously. "I won't promise you success, but I risk more than you do in trying—it is death for me if we fail. Come, we must not lose a moment of time. Stay! one word."

"What is it?" Ida asked.

"You know Senor Brown—Buckshot Ben they call him?"

"Yes."

"Then, if you escape, say to him that Juan Lopez tried to aid you. He will know whom you mean."

"It shall be so," she answered, simply, for she knew nothing of that night adventure which had made Juan swear allegiance to the man-hunter; she could not know that he was risking his life because he had known she was Ben Brown's friend.

"Follow me!" he then said. "Here is a revolver for each of you, but do not use them unless it is positively necessary. Come!"

The weapons thus passed to them settled the last doubt of his good faith, and in silence they followed at his back.

A few steps and they emerged into the main chamber, but silence had fallen upon it, and there was no sign of the other outlaws. A fire burned smolderingly at one side, shedding a little circle of light in the center of the long room, but the men had probably sought their couches.

Juan crept softly across the floor, and the fugitives, as they might now be considered, tried to imitate his caution. Every moment they expected to see or hear something which would prove that they were discovered, but they passed the circle of light without molestation.

Then, just as all were beginning to breathe more freely, came the dreaded interruption; but in a way even Juan had not expected.

Worse than anything he had pictured was the stay to their progress.

There was a sound of voices from the main exit and the guide stopped short. For a moment he seemed in doubt, and then he wheeled, and the light falling on his face showed most plainly that he was terribly alarmed.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he uttered, "it is Captain Duke! Quick! down behind these bowlders! They may pass on and give us a chance."

He caught Ida by the arm and drew her back, and as they realized his plan they knew that it was best. Near them were several rocks large enough to afford cover unless a search was made, and they were not slow in seeking their protection.

Ida and Billy Blanket crouched side by side, while Juan was but a few feet away.

The former, peering around the bowlder, saw two men approach, one of whom she at once recognized as the leader of her captors. The second was not a total stranger; in that tall,

erect, powerful form she recognized the stranger who had interfered to protect Billy Blanket and herself when they were set upon by the two ruffians in the gulch after Billy's attempt on the life of Hubert Lowell.

He appeared the same as then, and the mask, which was like a great hood, with only openings for his eyes and mouth, was still a perfect disguise.

The two unsuspectingly approached, and as they neared the smoldering fire the masked man spoke:

"Let us sit down here, Brant, where we will be safe from observation."

"Yes, yes," said the other, quickly. "It is just the place."

"How is everything at the cave?" continued Captain Duke.

"All goes finely; not a flow anywhere."

"No prisoners, I suppose?"

"Not one."

"Where is Venus?"

"Abed, captain, abed. She was busy all last night, and I promised her a good rest now."

Juan Lopez smiled grimly from his ambush. He knew that Brant, who was one of the sub-captains, as they were called, of Duke's far-reaching organization, was in a most uncomfortable mood.

He showed nervousness in various ways, when critically observed, and he had good reason for the feeling. In bringing Ida to the cave he had violated one of Duke's strictest rules. It was the theory of that individual that women were sure to bring trouble to any great scheme, and Brant had heard it so often that he was in a fever.

Contrary to his orders, he had captured Ida, and he was earnestly beseeching his patron saint to prevent Duke from taking a fancy to look the cave over, as he sometimes did.

"Let her sleep, for she is faithful—a rare thing for a woman. Now, then, to business. Do you know a man at the village who calls himself Ben Brown?"

"I think not," Brant replied.

"Well, I want you to hunt him up and kill him. Don't stand on the order of your work, but put a bullet through his head. He knows too much of our band. To-morrow, disguise yourself and take Juan Lopez and another man and go to the village to look him up. Juan knows him and is faithful, and you three ought to be able to get away with him."

"Of course!" cried Brant. "Let Juan point him out and I'll drop him at first shot."

"Don't be so sure, my good man. I tell you he is a bad man right from the word go. I've had my hand on him and couldn't keep it there, and you know I am no chicken."

"Good heavens! did he worst you, cap'n?" cried Brant, with an air which seemed to say that he considered Duke the hardest fighter in Idaho.

"He fairly played with me," Captain Duke acknowledged, with subdued passion.

"Is it possible?"

"Now, do you dare attack such a man?"

"I'll take him unawares and drop him before he can draw a bead."

"Good! Do this and you shall be well rewarded."

Ida had taken a deep interest in this conversation beyond the fact that it concerned Buckshot Ben. To her, the huge mask did not prove a disguise; in spite of all she recognized the voice and knew that Captain Duke was Seba Williston.

At last the man stood revealed in his true colors. She had suspected much before, for she knew him capable of anything, but undisputable proof was at last in her hands.

She knew not whether to rejoice or regret the unexpected meeting, for she had an unpleasant conviction that if she was discovered she would not see Shaker Gulch for some time to come; but it might be she could turn her knowledge to advantage.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a grasp on her arm, and looking toward Billy Blanket, she was surprised at the pallor of his face. His courage seemed to have wholly deserted him, and she almost expected to see him faint, unmanly as the fact would be.

"There's another chicken down at the Gulch who perplexes me a good deal," continued Duke, "and I wish you would overhaul him and see what he is made of. He is an apology for a man who calls himself Billy Blanket."

"That's a pretty name," sneered Brant.

"It's too pretty to be honest; it is suspicious in itself. Well, I mistrust this young rascal. He is not square and above-board; I'll bet my head he ain't. I want you to take him in and see what he is."

"Shall I bring him here?"

"Yes, and make him give an account of himself. Use him well if he is all right; otherwise—"

A sound at the further end of the cave interrupted him and then Venus rushed forward like a black blizzard, her great eyes unusually prominent.

Her appearance created a profound sensation among all that saw her, but the effect was varied to a considerable degree. Captain Duke was

merely surprised at the haste she showed, while Brant was seized with a great horror. One injudicious word from her lips would expose him to his chief and bring dire misfortune upon his head.

As for Ida and her friends, they saw the net tightening about them. Plainly, their escape from the inner room had been discovered, and they expected to hear the fact at once announced and their last hope destroyed.

CHAPTER XXII.

IDA MAKES A DISCOVERY.

THE appearance of the negress so startled Billy Blanket that he would have leaped to his feet to make a dash for liberty, but the strong hand of Juan Lopez closed over his shoulder and held him down.

The Mexican, knowing how matters stood in the cave, and that Venus was faithful to Brant, was hopeful that the crookedness of the latter would prove their salvation.

In this he had not reasoned incorrectly, for the moment the negress saw Captain Duke she moderated her pace. Brant's heart was in his mouth, metaphorically speaking, but she was equal to the emergency.

"Fore de good Lord!" she exclaimed, "I guess I's done had de nightmar'. I thought de cave was a-fire."

"I reckon you have been drinking, Venus," observed the masked leader.

"Not a drop, Cap'n Duke, but I's had bad dreams. I's gettin' to be an ole woman."

"You look delicate," he said, with grim humor.

"Better go back to your quarters, Venus," said Brant, uneasily, and wondering what was wrong.

"I'll take a stroll in that direction; in fact I think I'll go over the whole cave," said Duke, arising.

"Everything is as usual, cap'n," said Brant, who was beginning to perspire freely.

In that case there will be very little for me to do."

Duke was plainly determined to make the tour of observation, and a look from Venus quieted Brant somewhat, though he knew there was a weak point somewhere. The woman's look had been reassuring, but it also suggested the idea that the prisoner had escaped from his power.

The trio went away together, and Juan turned to Ida and Billy.

"Come!" he said, quickly. "Now is our time, if ever. Woe be to us if we are found. Hasten!"

He led the way with long strides, and the place of exit was soon reached. They passed out, and stood in a dark, frowning gulch, with a clouded sky above them.

"What are we to do now?" demanded Juan.

"I can not accompany you down the mountain at present. The moment Duke is gone there will be a search for you, and if my absence is discovered Brant will know who aided you. Secrete yourselves somewhere near, and I will join you when the excitement is over."

His plan was good, but Ida felt able to care for herself during the remainder of the journey. The way down the mountain was rough, and not without danger; but she was not timid.

"Leave us here and have no fear," she said, firmly. "Return to your place, and we will go on to Shaker Gulch."

"But you may meet the outlaws or fall over a cliff—"

"Have no fear, but return at once."

"But it seems cowardly, senorita."

"Good Juan, I tell you to obey. Your kindness is appreciated; but remember that Ben Brown wishes you to remain at the cave."

She had used the strongest argument of all, and the Mexican bowed to her will. He commended her to the care of "the Blessed Virgin," said farewell, and disappeared in the direction of the cave.

No time was lost by the two fugitives, but hand in hand they hastened away from the dangerous locality, and it was not until both nearly went over a cliff that they realized the danger of the way.

"It is horrible!" murmured Ida, looking down into the black vacancy they had so narrowly escaped.

"Be brave!" said Billy, who was in one of his firmest moods. "We have only to use ordinary skill and prudence now, and we are sure to succeed. Hold fast to my arm and let me pick the way."

They went on as he had said, a strangely-assorted pair in outward seeming, but bound together by a tie known only to themselves.

We will not dwell on the journey down the mountain. It was a slow and dangerous one, for the night was dark; but no human enemy appeared, and at last the cabins of Shaker Gulch arose before them.

At the edge of the village they separated, and Ida went on alone to the house which sheltered her.

It had grown more than ever repulsive since the events of the night, for Seba Williston stood exposed to her as a leader of outlaws; but she

forced herself to be calm, and was soon in the room which she occupied.

She could not tell whether Williston had returned, but it was not safe to have a light, so she sought her bed in the darkness and tried to sleep.

She succeeded at last, and it was broad daylight when she awoke.

Arising, she prepared for the day, and was about to go down to the post-office room when she remembered the note which Juan Lopez had tossed to her while at the cave.

It will be remembered that she then crumpled and thrust it away in the depths of her pocket, but the possibility that it might yet do harm made its early destruction advisable.

Drawing it forth, she read once more the cheering words Juan had written, and then she was about to sacrifice it by means of a match when she caught sight of a word or two on the reverse side which had, until then, escaped her notice.

Evidently the latter writing was of a different date, and in a different hand, from that of the note proper, and the once bold pencil-marks were nearly illegible.

On going to the window, where the light was strong, the marks became sufficiently distinct and speedily resolved themselves into letters and words.

And this is what Ida Williston saw:

"EGBERT HADLEY."

A faint cry fell from her lips, the paper fluttered to the floor, and the pallor of her face seemed to be accompanied by a weakness of body and limb as she put out her hand to seek the support of the wall.

"Egbert Hadley!" she whispered. "That name here! No, no, I did not read aright; it cannot be!"

She raised the paper and looked again—but there was no room for doubt. Distinct enough to settle at least one point, the name stared her in the face—the name of the man for whom she had traveled long miles, for whose sake she had linked her fortunes with those of the desperate wretch who was variously known as Seba Williston, El Cuchillo, Captain Duke—how many more false names were his she had no means of knowing.

Her agitation was not of long duration; it was succeeded by mingled exultation, hope and resolution, for at last she believed that she was on the track.

This slip of paper on which was written the name of Egbert Hadley had come from the cave of the outlaws ruled by Williston; that much she knew, and it followed, by course of fair reasoning, that Seba must know more of Hadley than he had confessed to her.

The slip of paper she held was about one-third of a half sheet of commercial note, and she was impressed by the belief that some one, after twice folding the document, had torn off the lower portion at the fold—the portion she then held.

On this fragment was the name of Egbert Hadley. What had been above? "A letter, written by him," was her decision; and it seemed likely.

"How came Juan Lopez by this tell-tale slip? Ha! Juan must know something about Egbert, or at least he can tell where he obtained this portion. I must see him; I must learn more."

It was well for the girl that she did not speak these thoughts aloud, for, though no one was near who was supposed to be able to hear, the door of her room had been cautiously opened, and a spy was stealing toward her.

He made his presence suddenly known as his hand fell upon her own, and the paper was caught from her hold.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

As the paper thus disappeared over her shoulder, Ida wheeled like a flash and stood facing—Deaf Dan! The half-breed had merely stepped back a pace after snatching the paper, and stood facing her with a sneering, insolent smile.

He expected a quarrel, but it would not be their first, and he had a supreme contempt for her, as is natural with boys of his age.

For once Deaf Dan had a remarkable and astonishing surprise.

The indignity aroused all the girl's aggressive inclinations, and with a movement too quick for even Dan to meet and thwart, she caught the revolver from his belt.

Another moment and he found the weapon turned upon himself, the muzzle within three inches of his face.

"Do not stir!" she cried sharply. "Attempt to touch me or regain this revolver, and I swear that I will fire!"

In the excitement of the moment she forgot that the youth was supposed to be deaf—supposed to be, for she had often doubted if he really was; but her words or manner seemed to convince him, and he stood like a statue.

She saw that both his sharp eyes and dark face were troubled, and she gained courage in proportion. She reached out her hand for the note, and then, if not before, he understood her

meaning. A sullen look crossed his face, and his eyes wandered toward the door, but she promptly moved until she was in his path of escape.

"The paper!" she cried, peremptorily. "Give it to me or I will fire, and you know I never miss the mark!"

Deaf Dan was cornered and outwitted, and his face was like a panorama. Anger, chagrin, and other emotions were plainly visible, as was the fact that he longed to attack the girl, but the unwavering muzzle of the revolver was not to be defied.

Ida's outstretched left hand, reaching toward the stolen paper, left no doubt as to her wishes, and with his face full of sullen fury he relinquished the paper.

A smile of triumph crossed the girl's face, but she was not yet through with Deaf Dan. She did not intend to give him a chance to go to Williston and tell a story to suit himself; her own must be the first related. Perhaps the postmaster himself had sent his servant to her room, but in any case, she was resolved not to be any longer a creature of clay in their hands.

Deaf Dan reached out for the revolver, but instead of yielding it, she rapidly spelled on her fingers a reply in the ordinary mutes' language.

"Go to the post-office; I will give it to you there."

"Why not here?" his nimble fingers flashed back.

"Because you have no business in my room. Get out of it at once. Go to the office and I will follow."

"I only took the paper as a joke."

"Then you had better improve the system of your joking. Lead on, I say."

This time the half-breed did not raise his fingers, but, with a surly look on his face, went down the stairs, with Ida closely following.

Seba Williston stood behind the counter, near the letter-boxes, and his bland face did not show any sign of mental trouble or suspicion. Ida wondered at his calmness, but tried to imitate it so far as was possible.

He smiled and nodded pleasantly, but she was not in a mood to waste words.

"For what purpose do you keep this boy?" she at once demanded. "Is it to play the spy, to invade my private room and to pry into my affairs?"

Williston looked genuinely astonished, but her own appearance was enough to show that she was in earnest.

"Of course not," he said.

"Then I advise you to tell him as much."

"What is wrong?" the postmaster asked, looking from her to his servant.

"I was just ready to come down from my room when he suddenly appeared beside me, and snatched from my hand this paper."

At this point she crossed the room and threw the article mentioned into the fire; after which she resumed her statement, and told all that had occurred.

Williston listened, and frowned, and Dan seemed to have incurred his severest displeasure; but in the midst of it all, Ida had a suspicion that he was not acting with sincerity.

When she was through he addressed the half-breed, talking with his fingers, and in the ordinary mutes' language. What he said was as severe as his looks, but Ida again doubted him.

"Believe me," he added, to her, "this shall not occur again. Your room and your papers shall remain sacred."

He glanced toward the fire, in which had disappeared the secret of Juan's treachery to him, as though he wondered what the paper had been.

Ida's attention was upon him. She had thought that she knew him well before, but each day was bringing fresh proof of his villainy, and she was more than ever impressed with the nature of her own position. Daily life within sight of such a wretch was terrible, and only her strong will and earnest purpose had kept her up so long.

With these feelings in her heart she had gone on, day by day, allowing people to believe her his daughter. As for his own purpose, she was wholly in the dark. Of what use was she to the cunning schemer who lived a double life?

Another fear was in her heart. Sooner or later, he must come to grief—his connection with the outlaws would be discovered, and the wrath of the honest miners would fall upon his head.

Their vengeance he might escape, for he had slipped from the hands of justice more than once—but would she not be likely to fall victim to adverse circumstances?

While she was thus meditating, Williston sent Deaf Dan to his room by a gesture, and then turned to her.

"My dear young lady," he said, "I have news for you."

"News?" she repeated, with a start.

"Yes."

"Of what—of whom?"

"Of Egbert Hadley."

The color receded somewhat from her face, and she unconsciously pressed her hand to her heart.

"What is it?" she asked, in a voice of unnatural calmness.

"I do not like to tell it to you, for it is not what we have both hoped. It answers more nearly to my fears."

"He is dead!" she said, with no sign of emotion except that statue-like composure.

Williston silently bowed his head.

"When and where did it happen?"

"Do you know of a place in Arizona, called Tombstone?"

"I have heard of it."

"That was the place, and the time was six months ago. He was there as a miner, and he had two partners who were named Max Reynolds and Pedro Alvarez, respectively. Poor Hadley went under from the effects of a wound received in a fight with the Apaches, and the surviving partners, tiring of their life, wandered away and finally found their way to Idaho. Thus it was that my inquiries chanced to fall on fertile ground, and this letter will explain all."

From his pocket he took out a document which had certainly passed through the United States mail. She received it, looked at the postmark and address—the first of which was "Boise City" and the second Williston's own name—and then read the letter.

Purporting to have been written by Max Reynolds, it told the same story as outlined by Seba, but gave so full and extended an account that several pages were covered.

To all appearances, it was a complete story of the last days and death of Egbert Hadley.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SURPRISE FOR BUCKSHOT BEN.

IDA read the letter carefully and critically, for, doubting Williston as she did, she knew he would not hesitate to concoct a specious falsehood to deceive her. It might be to his advantage now to make her believe that Egbert Hadley was dead, and she was weighing every word of the letter to gather an impression as to its veracity or lack thereof.

The result, for a wonder, convinced her that the whole story was true. Max Reynolds seemed to be a man of considerable education and he wrote gracefully and simply. He told of the formation of the partnership between Hadley, Alvarez and himself, of the mining operations and of the death of the former, always speaking well, but never effusively, of him.

In fact, whether sincere or not, it was, on the surface, a frank, manly and straightforward story of life and death at the Arizona gold region.

When Ida lowered the letter it was with a conviction that Egbert Hadley was dead, but Seba looked in vain for the extreme sorrow he had expected.

"I am going to Boise City, to-morrow," she simply said.

He looked astonished, and then seemed to comprehend her purpose.

"To see Reynolds?"

"Yes."

"You will be too late, for he is coming here. I no sooner received this letter than I wrote to him to start for Shaker Gulch at once. We may expect to see both him and Alvarez before a week's end."

Some further conversation took place, during which Ida watched the postmaster keenly. His sudden blandness of manner was in itself suspicious, though there was a reasonable explanation for it.

When they joined forces, a year before, he had solemnly declared that he would find Egbert Hadley, and it might be he had at the end become somewhat mindful of the respect he owed the noble girl who had followed his dark fortunes so long.

Against this theory was Williston's whole life—his career as El Cuchillo, as the thieving postmaster of Shaker Gulch and as Captain Duke. Could such a man have one spark of honor in his nature?

Again, what of the mysterious paper she had found at the cave?—the paper on which was written the name of Egbert Hadley. Was that an argument for or against Williston?

It might be considered either way, but once Ida was on the point of boldly speaking of it and watching the effect. Prudence, however, prevailed, and she resolved to investigate that part of the mystery through Juan Lopez, who could be communicated with through Ben Brown.

Ben Brown! The name came to her like an inspiration, and in that minute she resolved to make him her full confidant. She had intended it when she appointed that interview in the gulch she had not been able to keep; now, the resolution was stronger than ever.

He was honest, bold and shrewd; to him she would go, and by his judgment would she abide.

This decision made, she returned to her room when Williston broke the silence.

"I have another piece of news for you, Ida," he said, abruptly.

"Another?"

"Yes."

"Concerning myself?"

"No; I am one of the central figures, this time. I am going to be married, three days hence!"

The announcement was not a surprise in itself, though the early day for the union was hardly to be expected.

"To Miss Roswell!" she asked.

"Yes, it is all settled at last. I feel under some obligations to you, for you have done half of the wooing, and if you wouldn't think me playing a game, I would promise you a reward in the future."

He referred to the fact that, at his request, Ida had visited Sibyl Roswell and thus done something to bring about the intimacy which had resulted in an engagement; but, as he had intimated, she was not particularly impressed by his gratitude.

She soon went to her room, where she had much about which to think.

What about this engagement between Wil-liston and Sibyl Roswell? It was a question which would thrust itself to the front even when her own affairs required so much attention. To keep the postmaster in good humor, she had thoughtlessly aided him, and now Miss Roswell was about to link her fortunes with his.

Ought she allow the marriage to take place? He was crime-stained and sin-hardened—but what of Sibyl? When with Ida, she had always been mild, sweet and gentle. The girl had often likened her to a cat in a *purring mood*, but she had not liked her, and more than once had she believed she saw a glimpse of the "claws" neath the velvet.

"Buckshot Ben shall decide this matter, too," she finally decided, and then she sat down and wrote a note.

Having finished it, she looked from the window, and, as a man was passing, secured a chance to send it on at once.

Thus it was that Ben Brown, coming into the bar-room of the American Hotel after a morning ramble, found considerable news awaiting him.

"Hello, sport!" said Tim, the bar-keeper, genially, "I was just a-lookin' fur yez."

"Possible?" said Ben. "Well, I'm glad to find a demand in the market. Talk on!"

"I have tuk another bogus piece of money, which I dropped on an' refused."

"Ah! and who was the donor?"

"Misther Julian Parsons."

"Indeed!"

"An' now I think av it, it's meself is thinkin' dht others came from him. I hed a suspicion dht way at the first, but it seemed entirely wrong an' I give up dht idee, but dhts toime I hev him sure."

"Did you give it away?"

"I towld him it was bad, an' he swore in a horrible way at all counterfeiters an' give me won dhat was good. I let it pass so as to kape him cool, but it's meself is thinkin' he is dht mon. Don't yez think it looks loike it?"

"Just a hair, my bold Tim. Yes, it seems to be an acute case, and I want you to let me run it through. I'm working the mine for all it's worth, and some day there will be an eruption. Mr. J. Parsons has got in over his boots now, or I'm a government liar."

Tim agreed with him and then suddenly remembered something else and produced two letters.

Buckshot recognized Ida's writing on the first and at once tore it open. It was brief and merely said that she had been unable to see him the previous night, but that she was very anxious to ask his advice and would like to have the appointment renewed for the coming evening; and then she ended by twice asking him not to fail her.

The tone of the letter was too earnest to be regarded lightly, and as he had been surprised when she did not appear the previous evening, Ben decided without hesitation that he would not disappoint her.

This done, he opened the second letter, which was in a strange hand, and read as follows:

"SEÑOR BROWN:—I am going to prove to you that I am not a liar, nor incapable of gratitude. I promised 2 let you know if there was danger fur you, and there is, so soon. Captain Duke wants to kill you, and 3 of his men, including me, will bee at the American Hotel at dark 2 night 2 shoot you ded. If you can get the drop on us, do it, but I hope you won't lock me upp. Your devoted servant,

"JUAN LOPEZ."

This second epistle was a genuine surprise. When he acted the part of a merciful man toward the Mexican, he had had but little faith in his oath of fidelity, but, unless there was a trap behind the plausible warning, Juan was trying to keep his word.

Had Ben known of the encounter Ida had had with Juan and his fellow outlaws, he would have believed more implicitly in the letter.

"Well, I'll give the matter a trial, anyhow," he thought, "and if those fellows walk in with their buttonholes full of carving knives, maybe I'll inject a few pills under their skin."

Tim Murphy, who had taken a great fancy to the quiet gentleman whose name was Brown, looked often during the next two hours at him as he sat in a remote corner of the room, smoking and thinking.

Honest Tim had his own theory regarding Mr. Brown, but he told it to no one. In his opinion Ben was a Denver detective, who was on the trail of certain counterfeiters, and he had found them in the persons of Parsons and Merritt.

"In which case," reflected Tim, "it's meself should have a good bit av dht reward."

Little did the bar-keeper know how much was in Buckshot Ben's busy mind; little did he know how accurately he was putting together threads of evidence; little did he dream of the revelation the man-hunter hoped to one day make to the world.

In his own mind he had each thread of the wide-reaching web explained, but not yet had he obtained that proof, the great essential in cases at law, by which he hoped to surely fasten where it belonged the guilt of having murdered the miner of Cactus Creek—Placer Pete.

CHAPTER XXV.

BRANT SEEKS HIS PREY.

DURING the day Buckshot Ben made some preparations for the evening, and if Juan and his friends were punctual he hoped to be at the saloon of the American Hotel to receive them.

His appointment with Ida, however, which was for any time two hours after dark, must be kept at all hazards, even if the chosen assassins of Captain Duke had to wander in vain and gnash their teeth in search of their prey.

Somewhat before dusk, Ned Barton sauntered into the saloon, called for a glass of whisky, and sat down at a table to smoke and—well, possibly he had no other object in view.

A few feet away, Hubert Lowell was engaged in a similar way, but it was a little odd that these two men, who ought to know each other well, did not betray by so much as a wink that they had ever met before.

Possibly, again, they may have become suddenly near-sighted.

Somewhat later, a pale-faced young man, of a very serious cast of countenance, walked gravely in and sat down not far from Ned Barton. Possibly this last comer was a theological student.

Shortly after, a big, brown-faced miner and a Mexican-looking individual entered together, and after having a drink, sat down together near Hubert Lowell.

The Mexican was Juan Lopez, and we may remark parenthetically that he did not seem to be in a happy mood. He had a pipe between his teeth, but the rapid, nervous way in which he smoked, together with his frequent glances about the room, argued poorly for the condition of his nerves.

The next noted person to appear on the scene was Buckshot Ben.

He sauntered into the room with his usual quiet, cool way, his pipe between his teeth as might be expected, and, lifting a chair, walked directly to the side of the pale-faced young man and sat down beside him.

The young man regarded him closely, but made no move toward beginning an acquaintanceship.

"I hope you don't kick ag'in' tobacco," observed Ben, at once.

"Not at all, sir," was the polite reply, but the pale young man did not seem at ease, somehow.

"I take it you are a parson," resumed the miner.

"Not yet, sir. I—I am studying, but my health is very poor."

"Just from the East, I reckon."

"Yes, sir; I am from Pennsylvania."

"I thought so," said Ben, triumphantly. "I could have sworn to it the moment I saw you. Bless your heart! I'm from thar, too. Ay, more than that; we hail from the same town. Don't you remember me?"

"Can't say I do," was the somewhat crusty reply.

"Don't remember me? Well, that is odd. Did you ever hear of John Smith?"

"No," growled the pale-faced man.

"Stranger still! And you and I used to play marbles and steal water-melons together. Why, Adolphus Jones, where are your eyes?"

"I beg your pardon, but I am not named Jones; you are mistaken in the person."

"I'll bet the drinks I am right," declared Ben.

"Sir! Do you wish to insult me?" cried the pale-faced man, raising his voice.

"Not at all, but I'll wager that you were in the State's prison of Penn, five years ago," said Brown, confidently.

"Sir! your language is infamous. Such assertions as that call for action on my part. You must apologize, sir."

The pale-faced man had raised both his voice and himself. Arising from his chair he looked down on Ben Brown with towering indignation, but the latter remained as cool and smiling as ever.

"Come, now, old man, don't try to dodge your honors. I know you like a book, and I'll swear you are eighteen carat fine. I can prove all I say. Shall I name my referee?"

"I challenge you to do it," was the defiant reply.

"The name," said Buckshot Ben, promptly, "is Captain Duke."

His words were like fire in a powder-magazine. The pale-faced man was Lieutenant Brant, come to do his superior's bidding; and the captain's name so boldly spoken verified the suspicion he had for some time had—his character, if not his object, was known.

Before the revelation came his hand had been close to the pocket where nestled the revolver with which he had so confidently declared he would kill Ben Brown, and in a moment more the weapon flashed in the light.

Many a time had the lieutenant boasted of his quickness and his marksmanship, and never without good reason, and for a moment it looked as though Ben Brown was in deadly peril.

Another instant and up went his hand with that lightning-like motion before mentioned as one of his characteristics, and as his hard knuckles encountered the wrist of his enemy the revolver flew undischarged into the air and Brant felt a sensation as though a galvanic battery was playing along his arm.

Little time was given him to analyze the feeling, however.

Quick as a flash the other hand of the man-hunter followed its mate, and, catching Brant by the back of the neck, jerked him forward so irresistibly that he was sent sprawling upon his face; and in a moment more the victor's heel was planted on his neck.

Meanwhile, the big miner and the Mexican, who had entered the saloon together, had been anxiously watching proceedings. As the reader will suspect, they were Juan Lopez and another of Captain Duke's men, and they were on the field to aid Brant to demolish Ben Brown, and to work against the crowd.

It had been arranged that the lieutenant should cunningly seek a quarrel with the man-hunter, and then the lesser lights were to chip in.

Juan, serving an unpleasant cause, was all the while on nettles; but Pray, the third outlaw, naturally supposed all was working beautifully until he saw Brant thus humiliated.

Then he partially started from his seat to play his part, but Hubert Lowell, with the coolness of a veteran, thrust his revolver almost into his face.

"Sit where you are, old man, or chew lead! Captain Duke's cards are poor ones in this deal. Keep your hand from your revolver, sir!"

The last command was spoken in a sharp, resolute voice which was not to be disobeyed, and Pray sat still, while Ned Barton secretly whispered a few words to Juan Lopez.

Unlucky Brant had never been so suddenly and completely cowed. He lay under Buckshot Ben's heel, quiet because he was perfectly helpless, and it did indeed look as though Captain Duke's representatives had drawn all the poor cards.

"Well, Augustus Jones, how have I sustained the burden of proof?" Brown quietly asked. "It strikes me you have got in over your boots."

"Gentlemen, I appeal to you," said Brant, looking at the crowd, and trying to play his role of an innocent young man from the East.

"Spare your breath, old man, for this crowd is not so foolish as it looks. This afternoon they voted to hang you when you showed up, but at my earnest request they are going to temper justice with mercy. Bring on the others, pards."

Menaced by revolvers, Pray was marched to the side of his superior, and then Juan Lopez was directed to join the happy group.

He, however, had received his orders from Ned Barton, and he was not reluctant to act.

Out came his revolver, and, as he fired, one of the spectators dropped, apparently fatally hit, and then the bold Juan made a dash for liberty.

Half a dozen revolvers began playing, and the saloon was transformed into a Babel; but Juan made one agile leap and went through the window.

Some of the miners pursued him, others tried to resuscitate the man he had shot, and the remainder guarded Brant and Pray.

We need scarcely say that Juan was not caught; and this farce having been properly attended to, all attention was devoted to Brant and Pray.

It had been Buckshot Ben's whim to spare the two, despite the fact that the law ought to have them, and as none of his allies knew more than that they had come to the saloon for the purpose of forcing a quarrel on Brown—it will be remembered that only a few persons knew anything about Captain Duke or his band—the man-hunter was allowed to have his way.

Everything considered, he showed remarkable mildness. At his direction, ropes were brought and the two tied together in the fashion of Siamese twins, and when Brant's right leg had been secured to Pray's left, and their hands tied behind them, they were indeed helpless.

"Now," said Ben genially, "we will give you a chance to make a three-legged race to the sanctuary of Captain Duke as soon as you see fit. Possibly you may find it inconvenient to travel up the mountain, but all you have to do

is to keep time and look out not to get in over your boots next time. You may go!"

It was a bitter humiliation, and the outlaws' faces expressed the rage they dared not speak, but they knew they were lucky to get off so easily and little time was wasted.

Amid the derisive cheers of the miners, they started from the saloon and the "three-legged race" was auspiciously commenced.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MEETING IN THE GULCH

SEBA WILLISTON went out for a stroll shortly before dusk, but he had promised to relieve Ida in the post-office at an early hour, and he soon turned his face toward the town and thus approached the American saloon at the most interesting stage of affairs.

He was looking at the place with what seemed to be more than ordinary interest when a cheer arose, loud and musical, and then out of the door came the crowd.

Two men led the way and he stared in astonishment as he saw that they were tied together, side by side, and wrapped around with ropes until they presented a most comical appearance.

Behind them came the miners, who continued their ironical cheering.

Williston started, for disguised as they were, he recognized two of the most valued members of his mountain band, and their distress showed the failure of his scheme to kill his hated enemy.

He paused, anxious to escape observation, but he could not turn his eyes from the ludicrous sight, and he did not see that a man had approached him until a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

Like a flash he wheeled. Beside him, laughing quietly, stood the man he hated and feared most of all the world's inhabitants.

"Hallo, Seba, old man!" was the man-hunter's genial greeting, "what do you think of our Siamese twins over yonder?"

A look of fury crossed the postmaster's face, and with a quick motion he drew his revolver. He was no laggard on the shoot, and with almost any other man against him he would have succeeded; but before he could turn the muzzle properly, his enemy's heavy hand closed over his wrist.

For once, the man seemed stirred out of his usual calmness, and the flash of his eyes kept pace with the steel-like inflection of his voice.

"Drop that revolver, you dog!" cried Buckshot Ben, "or I'll fix you worse than your tools over yonder!"

He pointed to the baffled pair with one hand, while he himself stood erect and menacing, and the weapon dropped from Williston's hand.

To do him justice, it was not cowardice that caused the act, but the crushing hold on his wrist brought a numbness to his hand, and in every way he seemed overweighted by the force against him.

The by-play was not observed by the miners; they were wholly occupied with cheering the humiliated outlaws, and in whistling the "Rogues' March": the man-hunter and his enemy had the scene to themselves.

"Seba, old man," Ben resumed, after a pause, and in his old, careless way, "I must say you have a knack for getting in over your boots. One would naturally think El Cuchillo would be sharper than Seba Williston proves to be."

"I believe you are the devil, himself!" the postmaster huskily said.

"I suppose that is a compliment, and I am duly grateful. One thing in seriousness, however; you are overdoing this war of ours. Why, Seba, you fight right along regular and never win a move, malicious as you are. Look out that I don't step on you yet."

"I am in your power," was the surly admission.

"Thank you, but I don't want the honor. You had better make tracks for the post-office."

Some of the miners were walking toward the pair, and Williston no sooner heard the permission thus given than he took advantage of it.

Turning abruptly, he strode away, while Brown looked secretly at the piazza of the hotel where Sibyl Roswell stood viewing the scene. Whether she had seen Seba's futile attempt at mischief-doing, the man-hunter did not know.

Shaker Gulch was noted for its recuperative powers, and in a few minutes after the baffled outlaws were beyond the limits of the town, all the miners were back at the saloon and waiting calmly for the next sensation.

Buckshot Ben did not remain long with them, but, sauntering out, went to the gulch where he was to meet Ida Williston.

He had not waited long when the girl appeared, and they proceeded to business without delay.

"Has the letter addressed to John Marble been claimed?" Ben asked.

"Not yet," Ida replied.

"Very likely it will not be; I believe our birds have taken the warning. Were you prevented from being here last night by anything serious?"

"You shall judge from what occurred," the

girl answered; and then she told all that had happened to Billy Blanket and herself—all, excepting the discovery of the name on the note written by Juan.

"The Mexican is a trump," said Ben, "and I hope he will pull through the rapids all right. But you said you had a revelation to make to me. Perhaps you had better improve your time."

"You are right, for I have much to tell. I have before said that I am not Seba Williston's daughter, and you shall now learn why I follow his desperate fortunes. You know what—what he was when in California?"

"He flourished there as El Cuchillo, a cut-throat of the road."

"Yes, and it was there that I first met him. You shall hear the story of that event, but first let me tell something else. Until I went to San Leon, my life had been a peaceful one in San Francisco, but being left an orphan, I went to live with a married friend whose husband owned a hotel in the little town."

"Soon after my arrival I met Egbert Hadley, a young man who was both handsome and intelligent. I need not dwell upon those days, pleasant as they were to me, but at once state that our friendship ended in love. Perhaps I should say, love on my own part, for, tender as Egbert Hadley was, I cannot say positively that he returned my affection."

"He was, at times, very strange and beyond my comprehension. Moods of gayety and deep gloom succeeded each other when least expected. He professed to love me strongly, and in the same breath would declare his unworthiness of my affection; assertions which troubled but did not repel me, for I believed him thoroughly honorable."

"Now, looking back, I remember that even in his tenderest moments he never spoke of marriage."

"Perhaps there was an obstacle in his way; a shadow of the old life," said Buckshot Ben.

"I more than half think so now, but I was blind then. His manliness, intelligence and honor overweighed all else."

"His love for you was a misery; he dared not speak of marriage because of that obstacle; and it was that one thing which made him so gloomy at times. That is my theory. Go on!" said Ben.

"Suddenly, he disappeared from the town, giving notice to no one, going secretly and silently; and from that day to this I have never heard from him in a reliable way. He may have been murdered, but it has always been my theory that he went of his own free will."

"Six months passed, and then the hotel was burned and sacked by El Cuchillo's men. It was a scene of horror upon which I cannot dwell; suffice it to say I found myself the captive of the outlaw chief. Then he came to me with a strange proposition. He said he was about to abandon the road and lead an upright life, and if I would go with him as his daughter he would find Egbert Hadley."

"I was torn by conflicting emotions. Time had shaken my faith in Egbert; but I wished to know all. I was surprised to hear El Cuchillo mention his name, and thinking since he knew so much he might know more, I finally accepted his offer, though I have never been able to see his motive."

"A very simple one, I believe. He aspired to become a secret rascal where he had been an open one; he wanted to pass for a highly respectable man, and he relied on your moral influence to help him on. I dare say you do not realize how powerful a lever he was bringing to bear on the public, but I think Seba's game a shrewd one."

"There is reason in your theory, Mr. Brown, and you may be right. Well, I consented, and we came to Shaker Gulch; he became Seba Williston, and finally postmaster of the camp; but the days and months passed on, and I received no news of Egbert Hadley. When I spoke of him Williston said his agents were seeking everywhere, and I remained with him, hating myself every day for being near such a wretch. He is all of that, you know, though he has treated me respectfully at all times."

"Seba is sharp," observed Ben. "Needing a respectable family to give him public character, he wanted to keep you."

"He says now that he has obtained news of Egbert Hadley."

"He does? Hum! I should say his aims for the future are to be changed."

"Again your theory is reasonable. He is about to marry Sibyl Roswell."

"Aha! the plot ripens!" said the man-hunter, with sudden animation.

"You mean that she is to give him moral respectability in the future, instead of myself?"

"Yes; that and something more. When does this wedding take place?"

"In a few days."

"Excellent. Well, let them wed. But what does Seba say of the present whereabouts of Egbert Hadley?"

"He says that he died several weeks ago at a mining town in Arizona."

"In Arizona!" echoed Buckshot Ben, with a sharpness which was foreign to his nature.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BUCKSHOT BEN TAKES THE HELM.

THE man-hunter's sudden excitement did not escape Ida's notice.

"Yes," she said, "in Arizona. Oh! Mr. Brown, do you think you knew him?"

"It is highly improbable," he said, in a tone of vexation. "Where did Seba place his death?"

"At Tombstone."

"And how did he get his information?"

Ida told of the letter from "Max Reynolds," and of the prospective meeting with the self-styled ex-partners of Egbert Hadley.

Buckshot Ben heard all, asking many questions, but not once losing his coolness after that one tell-tale exclamation.

"Now, sir, what shall I do?" the girl asked.

"Simply this: Await the coming of those fellows, and meet them as though you had not a doubt of their sincerity. Perhaps you really feel that way; but there is room to doubt whenever Seba makes a splurge; he lacks a good deal of being eighteen carat fine. Yes, meet them as they said, and I will be on hand to play a trump card or two at the finish. Max Reynolds & Co., shall be sifted through a mill that brings out the bottom facts."

"May heaven bless you; I felt sure I could rely on you."

"You can, right along," Ben simply said.

Ida had not forgotten the bit of evidence which came from Captain Duke's cave, and she gave a full account of the paper on which Juan Lopez had written his note.

"This is a trifle confusing," said the man-hunter, thoughtfully. "Of course it has a meaning; the name was not written by chance or by spirits. Of course the way to get at the mystery is for me to see Juan and hear his story, though I confess that it strengthens Williston's claim a bit. You think the fragment you had was the bottom of a letter. Maybe—well, I want to study on this and see Juan."

"And you think I had better remain at the house until Reynolds arrives?"

"By all means do so. And, moreover, treat Williston civilly, and, in a quiet way, make them believe you are glad to have Sibyl Roswell become his wife."

"I—I have been wondering if it is right to let the marriage go on. She does not know what a villain he is."

Ben laughed quietly.

"Don't you waste any pity on Sibyl—not a hair!" he advised. "Just let the mighty Tiber roll on and look for a miniature deluge bimeby. No, don't fear for Sibyl; I know a little something about her, and I tell you she is a tigress on wheels."

"Do you know more than is embraced in your own experience?"

"To be frank, I do. There are places in the East where Miss Roswell, Parsons and Merritt may all be wanted, one of these days. But, a word about my personal experience. Do you know why, after forcing a quarrel upon me, the fair Sibyl and Julian turned their coats and apologized?"

"I have heard that it was so."

"You heard right; it was Gospel truth, miss. But, I believe you know more about it than I do. Were not you concerned in Sibyl's conversion?"

Looking at her keenly, Ben saw that Ida was embarrassed, and he knew the emotion had a cause. She was not one to make mountains out of mole-hills; there was a mystery somewhere.

The average man, at that moment, would have decided that Miss Williston had aided him, and that she was in love with his noble self. Not so Ben Brown. What he lacked in vanity was made amends for in perspicacity, and he was very well aware that, though they were good friends, Ida had no actual love for him.

What, then, was the cause of her confusion?

"I did go to her and assure her she was mistaken. You know I was with her when it was claimed that you played the listener," the girl finally said.

"Quite correct, but I am impressed by the belief that there is something back of that. Now, I don't want to be too inquisitive, but if there is a red-handed mystery surging around in the atmosphere, I'd like you to have you tell it to me in return for what I'll try to do for you."

His words seemed to increase Ida's confusion, and for a while she seemed at a loss for words.

Brown waited quietly. Finally she managed to answer.

"Suppose I am bound by a promise?" she said.

"Well, of course a promise is not to be lightly broken, but lives are sometimes saved by the breaking. At the same time I don't see who could have asked you to promise—what! I don't know what the promise was."

"Mr. Brown, have you faith enough to trust me for a while? I can not honorably tell now."

"Being a child of weakness, my faith is small, but I never calculate to annoy ladies. I'll thank you for your aid, and let the matter drop. By the way, to change the subject, I don't suppose you have a picture of Egbert Hadley, have you?"

"I had one, but Williston borrowed it and he claimed to have lost it."

"Um! I doubt it. Make it a point to search his goods and chattels, some day, will you?"

"I will, certainly."

"By the way, again, did you ever open a letter for him?"

"For him? Certainly not."

"When he was about to open a letter, himself, did you ever say to him, 'Here, take the scissors'?"

Ida laughed.

"No, I never did. Why do you ask such a singular question?"

"I've heard ladies use the words many a time when a man was about to use his clumsy fingers to tear open his letters. I thought you might have done so. Does Seba ever open his letters in your presence?"

"Occasionally."

"Does he use scissors?"

"I never saw him do so, though such a thing is possible. If he did, it would not be so strange as your questions. Are you a detective?"

"Just a hair; or, at least, I want to find a man who opens his letters with scissors. Never mind, however; I'll look after him anon."

The conversation was continued for some time longer, but, at last, Ida returned to the house.

Brown accompanied her as far as was safe, but he knew that Williston's wrath, if not his suspicions, would be aroused if he saw them together, and this danger was guarded against.

The man-hunter went back to his hotel and to his room, where he was soon seeking consolation from the bowl of his pipe.

"The plot spreads apace," he muttered, "and if the whole case is ever ripe, there will be a pretty big crash around Shaker Gulch. Wouldn't the city rise up and howl to see so many of its stateliest pillars pulled down! Perhaps it will never be, for I am in a nest of enemies who will send me off life's stage if they can catch me unawares; and if I die, it's ten to one the world will never know who killed Placer Pete. If I live, however, the climax will soon come, for I only want a few more links in my chain to have a perfect whole. Ah! Placer Pete, your death shall not go unavenged!"

The man-hunter thought and smoked until his pipe burned low, and then sought his bed.

He was soon asleep, for it was one of his peculiarities never to let the mightiest of schemes keep him awake; his nerves were of iron.

One, two, three hours passed. The hotel was quiet; seemingly, the last guest had retired. The clock in the hall struck twelve.

Several minutes passed, and then a rustling sound was audible in the hall. It was but a faint sound, scarcely louder than the nibble of a mouse.

Still it was caused by a human being, and some one, evidently with stockings, only, on his feet, glided along like a phantom. In this there was nothing particularly strange, for when people move at such an hour, they usually desire to be silent.

The dark figure paused in front of Buckshot Ben's door, listened, placed his ear near the key-hole and listened again. Several minutes passed, and, gradually, a smile stole over the features of the prowler as he heard the deep and regular breathing of a sleeper.

Once more standing erect, he put his hands against the door, and, lo! one of the panels slipped toward him, and was cautiously lowered to the floor.

Evidently, he might laugh at locks, for, in spite of all precautions, a way to Ben Brown's chamber was open.

Next, the prowler produced three objects from under his garments—a long stick, a sponge and a bottle. The two former were soon lightly connected, and then from the bottle he poured a substance upon the sponge.

The air caught the scent which arose, and had Buckshot Ben been awake, he would have recognized it as chloroform; but he slept on, unconscious of the danger menacing him.

With a steady hand, the prowler thrust the sponge through the opening from which the panel had been removed, and, as the distance had been well calculated, the stick just reached to the bed, and a deft turn of the wrist left the sponge on the pillow beside the sleeper.

The work of the prowler was not yet done, but, at the end of ten minutes, he replaced the panel, and stole back through the hall with the same stealthy step, ultimately disappearing in the room devoted to the use of Julian Parsons and Rufus Merritt.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WORK OF THE FIRE-FLEND.

BUCKSHOT BEN slept. With him, sleep was no restless tossing, no feverish wooing of the drowsy god. As though in admiration of his splendid physical and mental powers, Morpheus became a suitor himself, rather than a capricious flirt.

When Ben Brown slept, it was peacefully and well.

Yet, as there are exceptions to all rules, so on this night, his even breathing gave place to a deeper, heavier, unnatural respiration, and on

his forehead a strange perspiration stood in beads.

All this would have been visible to an observer, had there been one, for a steadily-increasing light shone on his face. It was not that of a lamp, for none was burning.

No; it came from one corner, near the door, where some dark object had first caught and then communicated its flame to the walls and floor.

Brighter and brighter grew the light, higher still mounted the flame, but still Ben Brown slept.

No longer was his slumber peaceful, however; he began to mutter and move restlessly. His respiration was heavy and hoarse. Mingled smoke and chloroform reached his breathing organs, and nature was desperately battling with opposing elements.

At last the man-hunter's eyes opened. He stared vacantly at the ceiling, and vaguely wondered at the red light on the white surface, but he was still in the grasp of the drug, and incapable of mental exertion.

And while he lay thus the red light mounted higher, lapping the walls until the boards crackled as though in glee; but no alarm arose from any source; no voice was raised to tell of the doom in store for the hotel.

Conscious that something was wrong, Ben strove desperately to clear his mind and discover what was amiss. One idea only entered his mind, but that was a most important one.

He must gain fresh air or die!

He made an effort to arise, but his limbs were like lead. This surprised but did not discourage him. He saw plainly that instant work was necessary.

By a great effort he raised his head and moved it near the edge of the bed, and then his shoulders followed, inch by inch.

It was slow work, but at last the greater part of his weight hung over and he slid to the floor, making but little noise, because of the way in which he fell.

He almost touched the creeping flame, but not yet was his mind clear enough to know what it threatened.

Every energy was bent on reaching the window.

He began the crawl at once and pulled himself slowly forward, his eyes always fixed on the point of safety. Painful indeed was the sight, and never before had stout Ben Brown been thus prostrated.

At last the window was reached, and with one hand he dashed out a light of glass. The fresh air seemed to rush in as though forced by machinery. He breathed it in great gasps, and each one was as an additional lease on life.

Physical and mental strength came back to him rapidly, and he realized his danger. The hotel was on fire; he would be burned if he did not speedily make good his escape.

It is not strange that in this crisis, affected as he was by chloroform and smoke, he thought only of himself. He might have raised his voice to shout the word "fire!" but he did not think of it.

Instead, he raised himself to his feet and shoved up the windows, and then, reaching out for his clothing, he wound all into a ball and prepared to leap from the windows.

His strength was every moment increasing, and by a powerful effort he succeeded in gaining a sitting position on the window-sill.

Nothing now remained except the leap, or drop, and he shot down into space.

In his strength he would have laughed at such a descent, but with limbs almost like lead, it is no wonder that he went down almost like a stone, and then lay once more insensible on the ground.

The fire-flend kept at his work. The red flames arose higher, lapping the walls with scorching tongues, and still no alarm arose to warn the inmates.

At last it came—a cry of "Fire!" Then there was "hurrying to and fro," and confusion reigned in the hotel. Men shouted and looked to their own safety, for it needed no prophet to tell that a fire of such magnitude, in a place so destitute of water as was the Gulch, could not be checked.

It was the old scene, too common to require a description; the American Hotel was doomed.

The falling of the roof found all, or nearly all of the people of the village about the ruins. Here and there were piles of the furniture and other things which had been saved, and the still blazing debris cast a red light over all.

It was Tim, the bar-keeper, who first thought to ascertain if all the lodgers were safe. They were looked for and found—all excepting one.

Ben Brown was missing.

The discovery alarmed all who had wished him well, for it was near his room that the fire had started, and as it was a roaring furnace of fire when the first alarm was given, no one doubted that he had perished in the flames.

After a while, Julian Parsons and Rufus Merritt walked aside and soon found themselves apparently alone.

"The deed is done!" Parsons then said, in a tone of exultation.

"Right you are, and my theory is thus veri-

fied. Bold Ben Brown was chain-lightning on the shoot, a great man with the bowie and as strong as an ox, but our small little weapons laid his proud head low," Merritt replied.

"It was a horrible death," said Parsons, shivering.

"Bah! do you waver?"

"Not a bit. He was in our way and he had to stand aside. That's all there is to it."

"I'll bet a dollar you ain't sorry now that you let Sibyl persuade you to give up the duel."

"I'm everlastingly obliged to her. Probably I would have been wiped out of existence—in which case you would have fallen heir to all the fancy golden coins we carry."

"We won't quarrel on that score, for when Sibyl is firmly fixed as Mrs. Williston, there'll be a shower of genuine gold for all of us."

They talked boldly, believing themselves free from all notice, but their confidence would have been a good deal shaken had they seen the figure which crouched behind a boulder and eagerly listened to all they said, after dogging them to the spot.

When they moved on, the listener slowly arose and revealed the face and form of Buckshot Ben.

"Go your way, my beauties," he said, calmly as he watched them recede, "I won't follow further, for my head is not yet clear enough for a game of wits, but it strikes me I have lost little by this affair. I understand what your 'fancy golden coins' are, and so does Tim, of the bar. One of these days, certain counterfeiters will get into trouble, and because you have to-night attempted my life, I will show no mercy—not a hair. To-night, Ben Brown disappears for a time from public view, but the shape that shall arise from his ashes will know no such word as mercy!"

On the afternoon of the following day, Ida Williston was alone in the post office. Her face bore a most unhappy expression, as, indeed, it might well do.

With Buckshot Ben lying at the bottom of the American Hotel ruins, where was there hope for her?

In the midst of her meditations, a shadow fell on the floor and she looked up to see a rough-looking, bushy-bearded man in a miner's dress. Without being ragged, he looked like one who wore old clothes because he had to, and his face and hands were decidedly brown.

"Hullo, miss!" he said, gruffly. "Hev yer got a letter fur ole Dan Flower?"

"No, sir," Ida answered, pleasantly, for there was nothing disagreeable in Mr. Flower's manner.

"Kin you tell when you will hev one?"

"I really don't know."

"'Pears ter me thar orter be one now, an' I think thar is."

"You are mistaken, then, sir."

"Mebbe I am—just a hair!"

Ida started and a look of joy overspread her face.

"Mr. Brown!" she exclaimed.

"Hush! not so loud. My case is an acute one, just at present, and you only want to whisper the name of Ben Brown when you hear talk of a monument to his memory. You must remember that my bones lie in the cellar of the hotel."

"Every one thinks they do," she said, happy once more.

"All except Hubert Lowell and yourself. You two are in my confidence, and you know that I am alive and healthy. This knowledge you must keep a dead secret. There's more than one person at Shaker Gulch who is chuckling over the demise of Ben Brown, but old Dan Flower will be around to watch them, and some day they will come to a stop."

"I think I see your object."

"Very likely, and, in any case, I will now be able to watch over you more fully, and to watch those who hate me. Let the gang go on. Let them marry, and scheme and so forth, for their day is short."

And then it came to pass that a new hand went to work in the mine of which Ned Barton was overseer—a man named Dan Flower.

Rough and ready in his ways, those whom he often shadowed never suspected his identity, and, day by day, the man-hunter contracted the coils which were to bring sorrow to the nest of plotters.

CHAPTER XXIX.

EGBERT HADLEY'S PARDS.

A FEW days passed—important ones in the lives of some of our characters. Preparations for the marriage of Seba Williston and Sibyl Roswell were steadily progressing, and the postmaster proposed to make it, Shaker Gulch's "big day." Plenty of free whisky for the whole population was to be the main spring of public joy.

Ida played her part well. Resting confident under Ben Brown's assertion that Seba was securing a bride as unprincipled as himself, she

showed a mild interest which was satisfactory to all.

Williston, happy over the death of the man he hated, coupled with his approaching nuptials, was as good-natured as a peaceable grizzly, and he soon showed her a letter, to which was appended the name of Max Reynolds, which stated that on Thursday he would be at the gulch to tell all about the death of Egbert Hadley.

Thus every one seemed to be happy.

Miss Roswell, together with Parsons, Merritt and Hubert Lowell, was at the Eagle Hotel, now the only place of the kind in the village, and she was evidently as happy as a bride-elect should be.

One thing began to be plain to Ida—Mr. Rufus Merritt had taken quite a fancy to her. He sought her company frequently, and once Williston jested about the matter to her.

As a result the news reached "Dan Flower," and he promptly bade the girl encourage her suitor, and gave some other directions which will appear further on in our story.

The day arrived on which Ida was to meet Max Reynolds and Pedro Alvarez, the men who claimed to have dug gold in partnership with Egbert Hadley in the Arizona town.

Naturally, she had awaited it with impatience and interest, though her faith was not of the strongest kind. It did not seem possible that Seba Williston could act a manly part, but it might be he was sincere, that he had long had news of the missing man and was to reveal it now that Ida was no longer of use to him.

He had said that Egbert was dead, but Ida had mourned but little over the news. Even woman's devotion will weaken under adverse circumstances, and the lapse of eighteen months, and the memory of Hadley's strange ways, had weakened the tie between him and Ida.

Again, she was not blind to the fact that Hubert Lowell was seeking her with more than friendship, and her lonely heart gave back response to his manly admiration.

Thursday arrived, and before the day was gone the girl expected to see Max Reynolds. It was naturally a day of anxious waiting, and a visit from Sibyl Roswell, who was deep in her preparations for her marriage on the following day, did not have the effect of soothing her.

Ida was in her room when the stage rolled up to the post-office that afternoon, and as two men alighted, she was attacked by a nervous trembling. She endeavored to look at them, but a mist seemed before her eyes and she could see no more than their forms.

She sought a chair and, by the time a rap sounded at the door, had grown calm.

Williston met her at the threshold.

"Reynolds and Alvarez are here, my child," the postmaster blandly said.

"Bring them here," she simply said, and when he had gone she again seated herself and awaited with perfect composure.

The three men came, with Seba at the front, and in a moment more Reynolds and Alvarez were bowing before her.

She had purposely placed chairs for them where the light was strong, while she herself kept somewhat in the shadow, and she now looked at them keenly.

The first glance brought an important revelation.

The first of the men, Reynolds, was Brant, the outlaw lieutenant.

Swift and sure came the recognition, and with it a conviction that she was the victim of a vile imposition. Williston—Captain Duke—had brought two of his tools from the mountains to swear to a falsehood.

As this conviction arose, she was tempted to at once declare her discovery, to accuse the men of perfidy, and to expose the character of the trio to the passing miners.

Prudence, however, conquered. In one respect, at least, Williston had spoken falsely. These men had not come from Boise City; but there was a bare possibility that they had really mined with Egbert Hadley in the distant Arizona soil.

These thoughts flashed through her mind, and then she prepared to do her part. Brant, alias Reynolds, had not yet recognized her; she would hear his story.

"You are the gentlemen who knew Egbert Hadley, are you not?" she asked, with surprising coolness.

"We are, miss," said Reynolds, with a heavy sigh. "We swung pick with him many a

day, and a bold and faithful partner he was, too."

"When and where did you meet him?"

"It was at Yuma, miss, a year ago last May. Alvarez and myself were getting ready for a trip to Tombstone, and among the dozen who went in the gang was Egbert Hadley. He and I took a fancy to each other, and the result was that we three crossed hands when we struck Tombstone and became pardons."

"And then?"

Ida was narrowly watching the narrator. He looked and acted like one who tells the truth, but she was not yet convinced.

"Well, miss, we worked together day after day, but never with much luck. Tombstone has seen many a fortune made, but we didn't strike it rich. Sometimes we had a lucky streak, but they was more likely ter be bad. Pedro here got tired of it and talked of going to Phenix, up by the Gila, but Had—that's what we called him for short, miss—and I were pluckier and we kept on until—until—"

Tender-hearted Mr. Reynolds drew his sleeve across his eyes, swallowed his manly emotion and kept on bravely.

"One day Had fell afoul of the Apaches and came home with a bullet in his side. He never riz off his bed after that. Pedro and I nursed him the best we could, but the lead had gone deep, and four days after Had died. We buried him at the foot of a mighty cliff, where the south winds would sing to him the songs of long ago of his childhood, and there—there we left him, miss!"

Husky and broken was the narrator's voice, and once more he brushed his sleeve across his eyes. Pedro Alvarez looked gloomily out of the window as though he saw in fancy that a monument of Nature which guarded the eternal slumbers of Egbert Hadley.

A silence ensued, but it was Ida who spoke next, and her voice was calm.

"I suppose," she said, "that you noticed that he had lost one finger from his left hand?"

"Ahem!"

Seba Williston cleared his throat vigorously, but the note was lost on his tool.

"Oh! yes, miss," Reynolds replied. "Had used to joke about it frequently."

The reply settled Ida's last uncertainty. The question had been a trap, for Egbert Hadley had not suffered the loss of a finger at the time she knew him; but Mr. Reynolds had caught blindly at the bait, despite the warning of his master.

Ida arose, clasped her hands, and stood before the self-styled miners.

"It is dreadful—dreadful!" she exclaimed.

For the first time the light fell upon her face, and, watching Brant closely, she exulted in the emotion he manifested.

A wild light appeared in his eyes, his lower jaw dropped and he looked the picture of consternation.

He had recognized the girl who was once a prisoner in his cave!

Not a change of expression was lost to Ida. She was sure that Brant would not have dared to come there had he associated her, in her proper character, with his ex-captive; and his sudden emotion proved his suspicion true, but she gave no sign.

"Be brave, my child, be brave," said Williston, who had grown calm after a brief uneasiness.

"And this is the end!" muttered the girl, as though speaking unconsciously.

Really, she was never more cool and self-possessed. She looked from the window and saw "Dan Flower" engaged in an argument with another miner, and she knew her ally would not fail her.

Brant speedily recovered himself. Williston had not noticed his emotion, and Ida seemed not to have recognized him; he believed himself safe after all.

The interview was continued for some time longer, but nothing further of interest occurred, and at last Williston led out his men, and Ida was alone.

A bitter smile crossed her face, for she had no longer a doubt in the matter. These men, tools of Seba Williston, had been brought to the place to lie to her, and the trap into which Brant had fallen proved the fact conclusively.

They had never seen Egbert Hadley, and their whole story was a falsehood. Williston probably wished to get rid of her, and what place more remote than the Arizona border!

CHAPTER XXX.

A WEDDING IN HIGH LIFE.

ON the morning of the same day, Rufus Merritt, sitting alone in the smoking-room of the Eagle Hotel, was surprised to see Deaf I enter and approach him.

He extended a letter, and when he had read it through Rufus looked very much pleased. He went to the table, sat down, and wrote as follows:

"DEAR MISS WILLISTON:—Your note has been received and read, and I am greatly pleased at your mark of confidence in me. It is now too late to have any elaborate presents prepared, for they cannot be obtained short of Boise City; but a week or so later would do nearly as well, I think. As you suggest, I will see you this evening and discuss the matter."

"Your obedient servant,"

"RUFUS MERRITT."

This letter he gave to Deaf Dan, who at once disappeared with it, and then Merritt sought Julian Parsons in high glee.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded, tossing Ida's note across the table.

Parsons read, and then nodded approvingly.

"Excellent, my boy, excellent. The girl is plainly softening, and by due care I think you will be able to storm her heart."

"The case does look hopeful, and I mean to press on to victory. I've just written her a clever note, and—"

"The blazes you have!" interrupted Parsons, with a start. "What did you do that for?"

"Because, for one reason, she asked for an immediate reply."

"Haven't I told you not to write so much as your name while we are at Shaker Gulch?"

"You told me so, but that was when Ben Brown was alive."

"It don't follow that all danger is past because he is dead. He may have an accomplice in this very town, and you know Ida Williston was one of Brown's friends."

"There is some wisdom in what you say, but I don't believe we are in any danger. Ben Brown, or whoever he was, was just the man to send off on a lone and desperate errand; in fact, I still believe he was one of Pinkerton's men, from Chicago. Naturally, when the bogus money became so plenty, if the local authorities could not handle it, they would seek Pinkerton. At any rate, Brown was a detective."

"He's only a ghost now," sneered Parsons. "Our little game worked to a charm, and I doubt whether he ever aroused sufficiently from the power of the drug to feel the fire that reduced his body to ashes."

"To whom do you refer, gentlemen?"

The quiet voice behind them caused both men to spring to their feet; but they looked relieved at seeing Sibyl Roswell.

"Judas! you frightened me!" muttered Parsons.

"You deserve to be frightened. Are you idiots, to use such language where our worst enemies may overhear you?"

Miss Roswell spoke with severity, but Parsons smiled confidently as he looked about the room.

Besides the bar-keeper, only one person besides themselves was present; and he—a red-faced miner—lay on a bench with closed eyes, his heavy breathing indicating that he was asleep.

Moreover, he was so far away that, unless his hearing was very acute, he could have heard nothing had he been awake.

"There is no danger, Sibyl," said Julian, carelessly. "Sit down, and let us talk a trifle. To-morrow is your wedding-day."

"Yes," answered Miss Roswell, her eyes sparkling, "it is to-morrow. Let all go on well until another sunset and we will be out of the mud. Instead of prowling about the country like frightened horses, and trembling every time the bogus money rattles in our pockets, we shall have the latch-key to old Williston's money bags, and I, a life-long football of fortune, will be a grand lady."

She spoke exultantly, and, unconsciously, in a higher key than the men had used. Parsons did not seem to share her exultation.

"When that time comes, are you sure you will not forget me and be content with the gifts of the gods?" he asked.

Sibyl's face grew somber.

"Julian, is this right?—is it manly?" she asked. "Have I not followed your fortunes through long years? Have you not always shared my prosperity? Have I not shared your adversity bravely? Have I—"

"Enough!" he said, hastily. "I was wrong, wrong. I beg your pardon, dear."
 "In a month from the time I am a wife," continued Sibyl, decreasing the volume of her voice but assuming a key quite as penetrating, "I will be a widow! With Seba Williston in his grave, there will be no bar to our happiness."

"Which brings me to remark, Where am I to be when the loaves and fishes are given out?" said Merritt, disconsolately. "How is the desert of my life to be made to bloom and blossom like the rose?"

"I thought you relied on Ida Williston," said Sibyl, smiling.

"So I do, for the love-in-a-cottage element; but what of the dollars and cents?"

"Don't you worry, Itufe," said Parsons. "We have been partners for many a year, and I'll swear that you don't get left while I run the circus."

Sibyl added her voice, and Merritt assumed a happier look, but at this moment the bartender, perceiving a lady in the room, went to the sleeping miner, aroused and drove him out of the place.

The man, who was none other than Dan Flower, seemed to be considerably the worse for liquor, and he staggered as he went out of the door, but when free from observation his form grew more erect and his eyes flashed.

"So ho! a very pretty little plot!" he muttered. "So Seba is to be a dead man before the end of his honeymoon! Really, this trio is going at a gallop, but it may be they will get flung before they go under the wire. Life's race-course is full of treacherous places. So they think Seba is rich, respectable and high-toned! Ha! ha! go right in, my beauties; go in, Seba; but it may be you'll get in over your boots!"

And then Mr. Dan Flower walked away. He did not attend very closely to his work in Ned Barton's mine, and, by chance or otherwise, he was near the post-office when the parades of Egbert Hadley left the stage.

These two men, Reynolds and Alvarez, as they called themselves, went over to the Eagle Hotel and engaged quarters, and when, soon after, Williston moved in the same direction, Dan Flower sauntered into the post-office.

"Well?" he said, looking at Ida.

"Did you see the gentlemen from Arizona?" she asked, sarcastically.

"Rather. Well, what was the result?"

"It is as I expected; Seba Williston has sent two of his men here to tell his falsehood."

Ida then related all that had occurred during the interview.

"I am not surprised," said Buckshot Ben. "I suspected that Seba wished to get rid of you, now that he was to marry, and my suspicions are confirmed. Brant and his colleague never saw Egbert Hadley. Tombstone has been selected as the fictitious death place of Egbert, for the reason that it is far away and would relieve Seba of your presence. Very likely, he hopes the Apaches would catch you, but don't have a fear; I will find Egbert Hadley."

"Do you suppose Williston knows aught concerning him?"

"Possibly, and then, again, possibly not. I won't give an opinion just yet. How about the letter from Merritt?"

"Your little scheme succeeded to a charm, and Mr. Merritt has obligingly sent a specimen of his penmanship."

She extended the note we have seen Merritt write, and Ben Brown looked at it with interest. His face told no tales, but his manner was one of extreme satisfaction.

"I'm very much obliged to you," he then said, "for you have helped me amazingly. Merritt has at last run his head into the noose, and I'll see to it that he don't slip away."

"Shall I continue to encourage him?"

"Yes, let him believe he is on the broad highway to your heart, and trust to me to bring you out triumphantly in the end. Merritt may revel for a while in triumph, but the awakening will be rude—just a hair!"

On the following day Seba Williston and Sibyl Roswell became man and wife. It was the grandest affair Shaker Gulch had ever seen; beauty, innocence, grandeur and wealth had met and united, if the verdict of the miners was to be believed.

Veracity, however, demands that we state the fact that the members of this jury were about four-fifths intoxicated. The noble Seba had rolled out his "bar'l" with prodigal gene-

rosity, and all went merry as a wedding day should.

Yet merriment, like a festive colt, leaped the fence that night, and the following day many miners were unfit for work. With their bruised heads well bandaged, they sat in state and chanted the praises of Seba and Sibyl.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MYSTERIOUS BILLY BLANKET.

BUCKSHOT BEN, alias Dan Flower, was one of the few men who took no part in Seba's jollification. He was one of those who looked into the grand room at the Eagle Hotel where the marriage was performed, but when Seba rolled out his barrel, Daniel rolled the other way.

Night found the miners in a wild mood, and Flower went outside the village and sat down on a bowlder, where he was soon joined by Hubert Lowell.

"Hallo!" said the man hunter, genially, "are you really here?"

"Of course," said Lowell, a little tartly. "Did you suppose I would go back on my word?"

"Just a hair. I didn't know but what that little festival inaugurated by Seba would hold you as in a vise."

"Don't you believe it!" cried Hubert, forcibly. "Perhaps it was a pleasure for me to see Rufus Merritt playing the lover to Ida; perhaps, not. Hang it all, Ben Brown—"

"Softly, my boy; don't get in over your boots. My name is a delicate affair, just at present, and should not be whispered about the key of G."

"I beg your pardon, but I am really worried by this affair. You know as well as I do that I love Ida, and it is not pleasant to see Merritt basking in her smiles. She may yet learn to smile on him with sincerity. Ben, what is your object?"

The man-hunter sat erect and looked his companion full in the face.

"Lowell," he earnestly said, "did you ever hear of the East Indian jugglers who handle the deadliest serpents with impunity, charming them into harmlessness by playing on a flute? In this case, Ida Williston's voice is the flute, and Rufus Merritt is living in a fool's paradise. Before I am done here, I'll tell the people who handle the counterfeit money afloat; I'll put Williston's neck in a noose; and there are other secrets I will unfold."

His listener was awed and convinced, but his great wonder found utterance in one question:

"In the name of the wonderful, what is the secret of your interest in this case?"

The man-hunter laughed lightly, and then became more serious.

"I have some reasons I don't care to unfold just at present, but I will say that my enmity against Seba Williston springs from the fact that he murdered the only real partner I ever had. Santa Barbara Saul and I were strong friends, but Seba—he was then El Cuchillo—shot him in the back, like the coward he is. For that, I expect Seba will grace a noose, some day."

"You are right, my friend; always right. I will rebel no more against your judgment and your plans. You know the way better than I."

"Just a hair, perhaps, for—"

The man-hunter paused as a sharp, shrill cry floated to them on the air; a cry which stirred both into activity.

"Help! help!"

"A woman in trouble!" said Buckshot Ben, in a ringing voice. "Follow me, Lowell, for those drunken miners know not what they do."

They started, but only a few steps had been taken when several figures loomed up in the darkness. The first, slight and frightened, was but a few paces in front of two brawny ruffians; but Brown hesitated a little as he recognized in the fugitive the well-known peculiarities which heralded Billy Blanket.

The latter saw the other men and darted toward them with another cry for help; and Ben at once stepped into the path of the pursuers, caught each one by the collar and hurled them back.

He had recognized both, and, knowing they were far from being ruffians when sober, he had no desire to injure them.

"Take a seat, pards, an' try ter feel at home," he said, laughing, as they sprawled together upon the ground.

They soon arose, however, howling with rage, and there was a movement for revolvers which the man-hunter nipped in the bud. Catching them in his hands he rapped them together in cymbal fashion—a comparatively easy task in their advanced state of intoxication—until they howled for mercy and promised to return to the village.

He released them and they went, soon disappearing in the darkness, and leaving him laughing in his quiet way.

He had conquered them in this original manner because he knew just how little "back-bone" they had.

Next, he turned to see what had become of Billy Blanket, but an exclamation from Lowell hastened his movements.

"Holy poker! what kind of a man is this! He has fainted dead away!"

There was contempt in his voice, and he made no movement to raise Billy from the ground but Ben Brown, merciful to the weakest of God's human creatures and ever ready to aid them with his grand strength, moved forward and raised the boy's head and shoulders upon his knee.

"I don't suppose you have any whisky with you, have you?" he asked.

"I don't carry the article, but I'll go to the hotel for whatever you want," said Hubert, ashamed of his momentary contempt.

"Perhaps—Hello!"

Buckshot Ben paused abruptly. The scrape, which will be remembered as one of Billy's peculiar features, had been loosened by the miner, and, as the boy's hat fell off, and revealed more clearly the contour of his features and head, a sudden conviction came to Brown.

The scream for help, the delicate features, the form—all were those of a woman!

In the darkness, many men would have been slower of observation, but the truth came to Ben in a flood. The evidence was strong, even beyond the present meeting; and thus was explained all Billy Blanket's lack of manliness at times.

Even then, too, he remembered how Ida Williston had interfered to save the putative youth after the attempted assassination of Lowell in the gulch, and he felt sure Ida had then known the sex of the counterfeit boy.

Hubert, slower to make the discovery, was aided by Ben's confusion, and he amazedly muttered:

"A woman!"

"By heaven, yes!" said Brown. "Here is a chance for us to work. It shall never be said that we turned our backs on a woman in distress. Quick! Let us have water, whisky, camphor—or whatever is wanted. Bring a drug-store!"

"Hadn't we better carry her to the hotel?"

"No, no; that would expose her secret. Those rude brutes in the village must not know she is a woman."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when "Billy Blanket" sprung from his arms with a husky cry, and seemed about to take to flight.

"Be calm—be calm!" said Buckshot Ben. "You are safe with us. No one shall harm you."

She dropped on her knees at his feet.

"Oh, forgive me—forgive!" she cried, in an anguished, broken voice.

"Why, of course; though there is nothing to forgive. You haven't harmed or wronged us—not a hair."

"I am so wretched—so broken-hearted!" she added, almost in a wail.

"Every road has an end, and we stand ready to help you out, miss. If you have enemies, or there are battles to fight, just say the word, and you'll have champions. Nobody shall say we let a lady go in grief for want of a revolver and knife to help her cause."

The bluff kindness of the man-hunter could not be mistaken; it showed in every tone of his musical voice; but upon "Billy Blanket" its effect was peculiar.

"Not you—not you!" she cried, wildly; and then, springing to her feet, she seized her s r p e, and sped away in the darkness.

Confused, perplexed and strangely moved, Buckshot Ben took two paces as though to pursue and then halted abruptly.

"Not me! not me!" he repeated, mechanically, his gaze fixed on the darkness where the mysterious girl had last been seen.

Hubert Lowell looked in surprise, for he saw that Ben's hands were clinched and his whole frame trembling.

What ailed stout Ben Brown!

"Not me?" he again repeated, this time in a whisper.

Lowell was awed to silence, for he would have been no more astonished had a marble statue showed emotion.

Five minutes passed without further words. In the darkness, Ben Brown's face was, not easily read, but when he spoke his voice was as calm as ever.

"Let us walk in the direction she went; other enemies may be abroad," he said, quietly.

Lowell breathed a sigh of relief. He had been awed and not a little alarmed at the scene just enacted, and he was glad to have the high pressure removed.

Ordinary dramas were all well enough, but not one with so much realism about it.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SIBYL SWOONS.

"That was a singular affair," Lowell observed.

"Yes," Ben answered, simply.

"What do you make of it, anyway?"

"I reckon she is a woman."

"That's very plain, but it strikes me she is a woman with a purpose; maybe one with a trail of vengeance, like yourself. Do you remember how she tried to stab me and then said she had made a mistake in the man? She don't look at all hard-hearted, and I reckon she must have been a good deal stirred up to use a knife on any man."

"Did you see her face?"

"No, not plainly; 'twas too dark. But, I say, what did she mean by singing out, 'Not you!' when you offered your aid?"

Brown stopped short.

"That's the conundrum," he said, thoughtfully. "What did she mean?"

"I took it that she knew you and, for some reason, didn't want your aid. Otherwise, why did she say, 'Not you!' so earnestly?"

"Perhaps I am crazy," muttered Ben, "but that voice seemed familiar to me. It came like a leaf from the old life; like the music of a happier part of my life. But, no, no! it can not be. The grasses of ten years have grown—Bah! what am I saying?"

He broke off suddenly and dashed his hand across his eyes.

Lowell heard, but spoke no more. At such times friends should act the listener if their services are required, but never the questioner; and Lowell was kind enough to remain silent.

They went for half a mile, but it was plainly an aimless ramble for Ben Brown. His mind was not on the present, but, staring straight ahead at all times, he went in fancy down the rough path of his earlier life.

Of "Billy Blanket" they saw nothing more.

The following day Ida found herself left alone more than usual. Mr. and Mrs. Williston occupied the parlor and seemed as happy as though their ages were less mature; the honeymoon had opened auspiciously.

For once the post-office was closed, and it occurred to Ida that she would never have a better chance to search for the picture of Egbert Hadley.

Seba and Sibyl were playing the turtle-dove as well as a pair of vultures could, and the opportunity must not be lost.

It will be remembered that Ida had possessed a picture of Egbert Hadley, but that Williston, to whom she had loaned it to aid his so-called search, claimed that it had been lost.

It was to settle this question that she now proposed to search.

The idea of intruding on the privacy of Williston's room was not pleasant to her strictly honorable nature, but with so much at stake she crushed down her scruples and went quietly about the work.

With no locks to overcome, she was soon in the room, and then she lost no time. The post-master's effects were not numerous, and all were soon examined except a leather valise, which was locked.

This fact naturally increased Ida's anxiety to see the interior, but the key was not to be found. She reflected. Beyond a doubt the key was on a ring carried by Williston, for she remembered seeing a small one among the others, but this bunch was always carried in his pocket.

Either she must have that key or leave the valise, for she dared not break it open. But how was she to accomplish her object?

While she reflected the door of the parlor

opened, and she hastily left her own quarters and concealed herself in the hall.

Williston came out, unlocked the door that led to the post-office, and went to that sanctuary, leaving the keys in the lock.

It was Ida's one chance; for a moment, at least, she could handle the keys. Great danger of detection was to be dared, but she was working for high stakes.

Cautiously she removed the keys, taking care that no jingle reached Williston's ears, and, flitting to the bedroom, tried the smallest key upon the lock.

It fitted, and a turn of the wrist placed the valise open before her.

Nor was that all; looking down among a variety of articles, she saw the picture of Egbert Hadley.

To secure the picture and re-lock the valise was the work of but a moment, and then, with a throbbing heart she hastened to return the keys.

One moment—yes! she was safe; the deed was done; and with a feeling of triumph she stole back to her room.

She was once more in possession of her own.

She sat down by the window to look at the picture. It was a photograph, of fine workmanship, and the face of Egbert Hadley seemed before her in life and substance.

Tears sprang into her eyes, for the sight brought back all the affection which she had overcome, little by little, during the past eighteen months. She had believed it possible that his life had not been a blameless one in the past, and this had given her strength to say, "His image is no longer in my heart;" but with that faithfulness of her sex, which seems to survive quite as well on barren as on fertile soil, she had never learned to lose that affection entirely.

Had Egbert Hadley really appeared at that moment, all the old love of her heart would have surged to the front.

Long she gazed at the bold, handsome young face, but, finally, with a heavy sigh, she laid the picture on a table and began staring out into the somber air as people will.

Deep in thought she saw Seba Williston go down the street and herself gave no other heed, but she did not suspect that she was otherwise than alone in the room until a hand fell upon her shoulder.

She started and looked upward. It was Sibyl who had intruded upon her, but the smile on her face showed that it was a friendly call.

The bride had never looked handsomer. Always brilliant in her style of beauty, an unusual color was now in her face, and she looked the personification of health and happiness.

"Aha! I have caught you, dreamer!" she said to Ida, playfully. "It is a suspicious sign when young ladies thus fall into thought. Of course I would not insinuate that there is a lover, and yet—Stay! what have we here? Why, it is the picture of a gentleman—Ah!"

Not once had Ida thought of the picture—the likeness of Egbert Hadley—until it was in the hands of Sibyl and the word "picture" had passed her lips; and then it was too late to rescue what had been so unceremoniously appropriated.

Sibyl, however, suddenly stopped in her bantering speech, and with that single exclamation, which was like a mingled cry and gasp, she dropped the picture, and then herself sunk to the floor in a heap.

Ida sprang to her feet in astonishment. The cry, the fall, and the pause which followed, were all beyond her comprehension, but it gradually dawned upon her that Sibyl had swooned.

At her feet lay the woman who had a moment before been so strong and gay, and the red roses of her cheeks had given place to a whiteness which startled her companion.

One moment she thought of calling for aid, but her resolution speedily returned, and she set about restoring her alone, using such remedies as were at her command.

Signs of returning consciousness were soon visible, and then Ida remembered the picture and put it carefully away.

She had not had time to determine on the cause of the mysterious swoon when Mrs. Williston opened her eyes and made a movement to arise.

Two or three swift changes passed over her features and then she was once more her strong, quick-witted self.

"Did I frighten you?" she abruptly asked.

"Yes," Ida candidly confessed.

"It was a sudden pain in my side; I am subject to them," she explained. "I think it is my heart."

"It must be something serious. You ought to receive medical advice. Shall I send for the doctor?"

Mrs. Williston laughed.

"Not by any means!" she said. "It was nothing of consequence, and I beg that you will forget it."

She arose, cast a secret glance at the table, and then continued:

"Let me make a request of you, my dear child. I detest scenes; and as this is only a ripple on a tranquil sea, I beg that you will not mention the matter to any one—least of all to Mr. Williston. Have I your promise, dear?"

Sibyl spoke very softly and tenderly, and as Ida was not really greatly interested in her health, she gave the required pledge, and then Sibyl excused herself and went laughing to her own room.

Ida was alone, but she did not forget what had occurred. She was not satisfied with the explanation given her. She did not believe Sibyl had been prostrated by physical illness. To her it looked like a genuine swoon, and such things always have a cause.

Mrs. Williston had been looking at Egbert Hadley's picture when she fell, and the conviction came to Ida that in that photograph lay the cause of her swoon.

What was the mystery of the case?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CLEW AT LAST.

On the afternoon of that same day, Dan Flower, *alias* Ben Brown, sauntered into the Eagle Hotel and entered the bar-room. Four men were present as customers, and as Parsons and Merritt were among the number, Ben first of all took a drink at the bar, to keep up the appearances of his assumed characters.

Then he sat down on a bench to look over a San Francisco paper, which had found its way to Shaker Gulch.

Evidently news had not been plentiful when the sheet went to press, and Ben found it so devoid of interest that he was soon reading the advertisements, as people will when there is nothing else of interest.

Thus it was that his eyes rested upon one article, whose prominent head-line and heavily-leaded body were calculated to attract attention.

"INFORMATION WANTED!"

"Of EGEBERT HADLEY, who was, prior to June, 18—, a resident of Stockton, California. He is, if living, twenty-eight years of age, of medium size, compactly built, dark complexioned, with black, curling hair, dark-brown eyes, and a wide forehead. Is well educated and of gentlemanly address. Any information leading to his discovery paid for liberally."
G. W. CARVER,
Attorney-at-Law.

Such was the notice read by Ben Brown, and the eagerness with which he perused each line may be imagined. Yet, such was his control over his features, Parsons, who was at that moment looking directly at him, wondered if the big-bearded miner who read so stoically, really knew enough of letters and words to comprehend what he read.

Little did he suspect that the man in question was really one whom he believed his own hand had sent to the future world.

Ben Brown was inwardly exultant. Until then, one epoch in the life of Egbert Hadley had stood out like an oasis in the desert. He had suddenly appeared at Santa Barbara, where Ida met him; he had as suddenly disappeared from there a few months later.

With so little to work upon, Ben had been troubled to know how to work up the case of Ida's sometime lover; but, most opportunely, important evidence had come to him.

The date mentioned in the advertisement was less than a year before the Santa Barbara episode, and it was clear that it would be easy to learn the *past*, if not the *present*, of the missing man.

The article, too, showed that Hadley had not been friendless; other people besides Ida wished to find him: and when a lawyer thus advertises, there is usually money in the case.

"Another link in the chain," thought Mr. Brown, serenely. "I think I will take a run down to Ogden and communicate with Stockton as soon as possible. I won't raise Ida's hopes

too high, but I'll bet a dollar or so that I bring her news when I return. Just a hair!"

When the speaker left the bar-room, half an hour later, the paper was no longer visible. Possibly, he had thoughtlessly carried it away in his pocket.

That evening, the man-hunter again met Ida in the gulch.

"Good-evening, miss. How's Seba and the rest of his family?" Ben abruptly asked.

"Happy; oh! so happy!" said Ida, laughing. "They are as tender as though both were in their teens."

"Tender as a grandad owl!" quoth Ben. "Not that I know much about owl fodder, but tradition says it ain't very loose-jointed. And how do the beaming lovers use you?"

"They are strangely pleasant."

"Those two words hitch together as though made to work in pairs. If they are pleasant to you, it is strange. Ay, more than that, it is confounded suspicious. I advise you to keep both eyes open and watch for squalls."

"I do not trust them, and I watch as well as I can. I have no faith in them."

"Not a hair. You might as well trust a rabid dog. Seba is a tough old galoot from the ground up, and I reckon Sibyl can't show any too clean a record. Just watch 'em, Miss Ida, and if they get rusty, my word for it, they'll get in over their boots."

"I have at last found the picture of Egbert Hadley."

"Good! May I see it?"

Ida passed over the photograph and, striking a match, he looked long and earnestly at the pictured face. Each feature seemed to be closely examined, and his own face bore a look of satisfaction.

"If I ever see this man, I shall recognize him," he simply said. "It is a face not easily forgotten."

"I think it best that you keep it for a while. It is not safe in my possession."

"Very good; I'll freeze to it, and it shall be carefully preserved."

"One singular occurrence has already come of it. Having found it among Williston's effects, I retired to my room and fell into deep thought, leaving the picture on the table. Then Sibyl came in unheard by me, and, before I knew of the danger, she was looking at the photograph."

"Indeed?" said Ben, with interest. "Well, what said the fair Sibyl?"

"She gave one little cry and sunk to the floor in a swoon."

"Possible? Well, this is an item. So Sibyl swooned! Strong, healthy, world-wise Sibyl swooned! Now, then, the world moves. What excuse did she give when she recovered?"

"She said it was a trouble of her heart."

"That's a pity. It's natural that a bride should have some commotion of the heart; I believe it's been a fa-hion ever since Cupid started in business; but when a woman faints, the air grows heavy."

"Do you believe her explanation?"

"Not a hair."

"Then it was caused by the picture?"

"We can't doubt it. Well, I am now going to push your case rapidly, and in a few days I'll be able to tell you all about Egbert Hadley prior to your acquaintanceship with him. The rest will follow as a matter of course."

He then told her what he had read in the San Francisco paper, adding that he was at once going to Ogden, Utah, to open communication with the Stockton lawyer.

"When I return I hope to have the whole case in my hands," he added. "In the meanwhile, do not snub Rufe Merritt, but let him wade on in the flowery fields of his fool's paradise—meaning no disrespect to you, miss. By the way, is there any money in your family?"

Ida started at the abrupt question.

"No; I am friendless and a beggar," she replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"Think again. I am persuaded to believe that you may have fallen heir to a fortune. That's the sole way in which I can account for the sudden and unnatural love and piety of Seba, Sibyl and Rufe Merritt, as shown to you."

"Now that I reflect, I have an indistinct recollection of hearing my mother speak of an elder brother who ran away from home when she was a child, and was never again heard from by the family; but there can't be anything in that."

"There may be—just a hair. We are speculating in possibilities pretty heavily just now

and I must prophesy that the acute tenderness of Seba & Co. may arise from this very cause."

Ida said no more, but the theory seemed so improbable that she was far from convinced.

"One thing more," said Buckshot Ben, anon. "I'm going to deal in another surmise. It was Billy Blanket who asked you to break up the duel between Parsons and myself."

The words were lanced forth with a rapidity of speech not common to the cool miner, and this fact, or the words themselves, caused Ida to start violently. For once she did not answer readily, and Ben saw that she was confused.

"Answer me," he said, grasping her arm, and speaking huskily. "Was—was— Am I right?"

"Oh! don't! don't!" she cried. "Mr. Brown, whatever is the fact, I am not at liberty to tell."

"I have done a little something for you."

"You have done much, everything. You have stretched forth your strong hand to aid a helpless, friendless girl, and I bless you for it. You have been a noble, kind, grand—a tower of strength. I owe you all, and yet—yet—"

"Billy Blanket is no boy, but a woman," he continued in the same unnatural voice.

"Spare me, spare me! I feel so mean, so contemptible, to refuse to answer when you have done so much for me; but, oh! won't you wait for a while; I dare not break the solemn oath of secrecy I have taken."

Ben Brown did not answer at once. The darkness hid his face, but there was every sign of perturbation in his manner. Once he brushed his hand across his forehead as though a pain lurked behind the broad brow.

Ida, filled with apprehension and dismay, waited not daring to trust her voice.

When Buckshot Ben spoke it was with his old calmness.

"I can't blame you, miss, not a hair; and your scruples are honorable, though like arrows dipped in poison. However, there is no cloud between us and the ball of life will roll calmly on. To-night I start for Ogden, and it may be a week before I return. At all times, however, be sure of me and let yourself drift with the tide. If Rufe Merritt proposes marriage, set the day just two weeks hence. I'll be at the wedding!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE ROAD.

HALF an hour later Ida left Ben Brown and returned to Williston's house. She felt greatly pained because she had been obliged to refuse his one request, but the result had only served to show again the nobility of his character.

Moved as he had seldom been in the later years of his life, he had generously, bravely put his own affairs aside; he had for a while turned his back on a secret which seemed to touch the innermost recesses of his heart and head; and with a steady firmness had once more avowed his devotion to her cause.

No wonder she saw him in a grand nobility.

For his own part he did not delay after her going, but strode away toward the cabin where Hubert Lowell had made his home since the fire.

No sooner was he gone from the place of meeting than from the shadow of a rock arose another person.

To all appearances it was an Indian girl. Dress and complexion went to show this; and it was an undeniable fact that she must have heard all that passed between Ben and Ida.

She looked after both and seemed attacked by some strong emotion. Her breath came in gasps and she dashed her hand across her eyes as though to remove unbidden tears—an impatient, feverish gesture—but no one was there to see her emotion.

After a little pause, she stole away down the gulch. A hundred yards away she arrived where a horse, saddled and bridled, stood in a niche.

He greeted her with brute pleasure; she patted his neck, and then sprang into the saddle. Riding on through the gulch, she reached the southern limit of the town by a *detour*, and then, pausing, looked back toward the dark cabins.

"He shall not go on the trail alone!" she said, unconsciously speaking aloud.

At the same moment, Ben Brown was bid-

ding farewell to Hubert Lowell, at the door of the latter's cabin.

"Don't forget what I have told you," he said, earnestly, "for much depends on your faithfulness. Shadow the parties I have mentioned, and see that they do not leave Shaker Gulch. I could tell you of a lone miner, of a little Arizona camp, whose life went out under an assassin's hand—but this must be a tale of the future. When I return, it will be as an instrument of justice. Keep you the camp-fire burning while I am away."

"I will not forget; I sacredly promise," Lowell replied. "So far as my gifts will allow, I'll be wise and sleepless."

Buckshot Ben wrung his hand and turned away. Near the door stood a large, clean-limbed horse, and the man-hunter mounted to his back.

"Remember!" he earnestly said, looking back at Lowell; and then he rode away in the night, his face toward the south.

Not far had he gone, however, when two horsemen fell into place behind him, keeping at a safe distance, but, plainly, on his trail.

Rough, villainous-looking fellows they were, true specimens of the Western desperado, and a profusion of arms showed about their persons.

"Not too fast, Jeemes," said one. "We'll make that galoot smell a mice. He is sharper nor a 'Pache Injun."

"I'm not gwine ter lose sight on him," growled Jeemes. "We're booked ter kill him, an' it shall be did as soon as we git cl'ar o' ther town. I ain't gwine ter chase him cl'ar ter Ogden."

"Still it's our best holt ter go light an' slow. They do say he is ther ugliest varmint in a fight that treads Western sile. We want ter—"

"Ter ride!" interrupted Jeemes. "Do yer see he has put his boss ter a gallop so quick! Spur on, ole man, or we shall lose him."

It was good advice, if they hoped to overtake Ben Brown, for he had good horse-flesh beneath him, and was speeding down the southern trail at a telling speed.

Many thoughts were in his busy brain, and for at least two miles he rode without scarcely turning his head. He was going again over the fragments of evidence he had gained in the various cases which had of late occupied his attention, and all these fragments he was joining together, as the welder joins the links of a chain.

In the present case some links were missing, but Ben hoped to soon have the whole case clearly in his hands.

He finally aroused and paid more attention to his course, and then, feeling uncomfortable with his disguise about his head, he cast off the wig and false beard which had gone so far to conceal his identity, and "Dan Flower" was transformed into Buckshot Ben.

All night he rode, keeping a rapid pace, until just at daybreak he arrived at Whip Canyon, so called, a narrow but deep cleft in the earth peculiar to the basin district.

He knew the place well. Whip Canyon was ten miles long and of a varying width, which never exceeded a hundred feet, and often narrowed to thirty. In one place only, called the "Narrows," was it possible for a man or horse to leap it; so toward this point Ben made his way.

He found the place, and where the narrowing walls of the canyon reached to within three feet of each other, caused his horse to take the leap.

A hundred feet deep was the cleft at this point, and a fall would have dashed the luckless twain upon ragged rocks at the bottom; but the horse, neither timid nor clumsy, went over in safety.

"I reckon I'll halt here for an hour," said the man-hunter, drawing rein. "It's the best camping place of which I have knowledge around here."

And he acted upon the idea.

Unknown to him another camp was within sight of the "Narrows," though upon the northern side. It was that of the two roughs who had pursued him from Shaker Gulch.

After leaving the town they had once lost sight of their quarry, and then, riding madly to overtake him, had, oddly enough, passed him in the darkness, and themselves assumed the position of leaders without once knowing it.

As they neared Whip Canyon they grew uncertain and uneasy. Having been over the ground but once before, they could not locate the "Narrows" in the darkness, and being fearful that they would fall into the chasm, they finally encamped on the plain within less than two hundred yards of the point they wished to reach, but sufficiently to one side, so that they did not hear Ben when he passed.

Though unseeing, they were not unseen, for as they sat smoking and growling among the rocks, a dark figure crept toward where they had placed their rifles, hovered around the place for a while, and then retreated.

In this person we recognize the Indian girl whom we observed a few hours before at Shaker Gulch.

Day dawned and the desperadoes prepared to move on; then, looking ahead they were filled with joy and anticipated triumph.

There, in plain sight, was Whip Canyon, and there, too, just beyond the Narrows, was Buckshot Ben.

The ruffians leaped into their saddles and spurred toward the crossing, and, beyond that point, Ben lounged on the ground, apparently unconscious of their approach.

Appearances, however, were deceitful; Ben was a man who was seldom taken unawares; and while he kept his place he was secretly observing them.

"They ride fast and look tough, and it strikes me they mean mischief; just a hair. Ha!"

Suddenly, from among the rocks nearer to the canyon, out shot another rider, also dashing toward the Narrows.

Brown saw that the new-comer was a woman, apparently an Indian girl, and he arose to his feet promptly. Just then one of the desperadoes raised his rifle to his shoulder, and as the muzzle covered the girl, out came Ben's twin revolvers.

"If that's the game I reckon my sixes will count."

So saying he took one step forward, but the girl, who was almost at the Narrows, put out her hand and spoke in good English.

"Wait! Remain where you are, stranger. Those dogs can do no harm with their rifles, for I have plugged up the tubes. You have only to fear their revolvers."

She reached the canyon and leaped her horse across, pausing at his side. Seeing, as he thought, only a handsome Indian girl, he gave her but a glance and then devoted his attention to the on-coming roughs.

"Oh! I don't fear 'em a hair!" he said lightly. "It is you they are after."

"No, no; you are wrong. It's your life they seek and I rode here to warn you. The counterfeiters of Shaker Gulch think Ben Brown is dead, but Dan Flower has been marked as a suspicious man. Yonder roughs were sent to kill you, as I well know. For Heaven's sake, be careful."

Her words were both convincing and astonishing, but it was no time to ask questions.

"Down from your horse, girl, and stand behind me," cried Buckshot Ben. "I'll meet those dogs at the brink of this chasm!"

His voice rung out with more than ordinary sharpness, and his eyes had an ominous glitter as he turned wholly toward the roughs, who were coming on with their useless rifles slung over their shoulders and their revolvers ready for use.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE INDIAN GIRL—DEAF DAN'S MISSION.

THE miner faced the danger with his usual coolness. He read the spirit of murder in every lineament of the ruffians' faces, and he had been dealing with such creatures too long to feel any compunctions about vigorous work.

One warning they should have, and then, if they disregarded it—to the quickest man on the trigger belonged the first shot.

The Indian girl had dismounted and, standing at the head of her horse, awaited the result with evident anxiety.

Up went the hands of the man beside her, and two unwavering revolvers covered the ruffians.

"Halt!" cried Buckshot Ben, sharply. "Dare to advance one yard nearer this chasm and you die in your tracks!"

Clear and determined the command rung out, but it was not headed. Straight onward rode the men, while one of the two swung up his revolver and fired hap-hazard.

The bullet sped wide, but it was enough to settle the man-hunter's last scruple.

"You've chosen your own luck," he continued; "don't growl if these slugs hit hard!"

And then his revolvers began to play. Once, twice, thrice, as regularly as fate, the reports rung out, punctuated by one or two harmless return shots, and then the two would-be assassins lay flat on the ground and their riderless horses were galloping wildly away.

Brown saw that one of the men still lived, and he leaped the chasm and went to his side.

The fellow was indeed "hit hard," and the rush of blood from his breast showed that his race was about run.

"Let me alone!" he said, huskily, looking at Ben. "You can't hasten ther breakage much, anyhow; let me die in peace."

"I sha'n't object, but I must say I think it would ease your mind to project a confession," Buckshot observed.

"So I will; I'll put yer on ther track," came the answer, with surprising energy. "It was Julian Parsons who bired me fur this job; he said you was a detective, an' I know he is a counterfeiter; but he sent me ter my death. Hark ye, pard, ef you'll hunt him down—ef you'll sarve him as he has sarved us, I'll—"

It was the last remnant of strength, fictitious at that, which had kept the man up so long; and when the supply failed it came like a crash.

With the unfinished sentence on his lips, the misguided man gasped, shivered and fell back like a clod to the ground.

He was off the trail forever.

There was no more for Ben Brown to do, and he turned away from the bodies and looked for the Indian girl. She was not visible from where he stood, but might be among the adjacent rocks.

Once more he leaped the chasm, and then he saw her. Not near at hand, but out on the plain, a mile away, and going at full speed.

"That's what I call a sudden farewell," he said, in surprise. "I'm sorry, for—"

He paused, suddenly, for a thought, a suspicion, had come with a force which rendered it a conviction.

"Fool! fool!" he cried, angrily. "I have grown as blind as an owl!"

With these words he rushed to his own horse, which had been standing a few paces away, sprung upon his back and dashed away in pursuit.

It will be remembered that no time had been given him to observe the minutiae of her appearance; he had barely seen that she had the appearance of an Indian girl, and was certainly dressed as one; but it had suddenly flashed upon him that the Indian girl and Billy Blanket was one!

"Fool! fool!" he again muttered, bitterly, as he urged on his horse.

And yet he wronged himself. In all his acquaintanceship with Billy Blanket, he had never fully seen him, or her, by daylight; and there at Whip Canyon he had certainly had no time to closely observe the supposed Indian.

Bravely rode was his pursuit, but the leading horse was far superior to his own, and at the end of an hour he reined up on the prairie and sat sullenly in his saddle, looking off over the plain where no other living creature was in sight.

He had been fairly distanced.

Two days passed quietly at Shaker Gulch. Ida remained under Williston's roof and was still treated with that respect which had so suddenly come to the surface with the postmaster. Nobody could have been more kind outwardly than Mr. and Mrs. Williston, but Ida felt that she was standing on the brink of a precipice.

She had managed to secure one interview with Hubert Lowell, an important one, for on that occasion the lover, tortured by fears at seeing Merritt so constantly playing the devoted suitor, resolved to put his own fate to the test.

The result made him happy; he went away the husband-elect of the woman he loved.

Both of them settled down to patiently await the return of Ben Brown. They had come to have an amazing amount of faith in his prowess and skill, and dark as seemed the prospect when viewed critically, they believed he would carry them through in triumph.

In entering into this agreement Ida had, of course, given up entirely her old love for Egbert Hadley. But she felt sure that insur-

mountable obstacles lay between them, while in Lowell she found manly, honest, straightforward affection, which could not be mistaken.

One afternoon, she was sitting in her chamber, while Sibyl guarded the post-office treasures, Seba himself being outside.

Thus situated, Ida could look down the stairs and see Sibyl as she sat behind the counter, but she took no particular interest until Williston entered the office and approached his wife.

In his hand he held a paper, and after a few words, which the distance rendered inaudible to Ida, he laid the paper before Sibyl, and pointed to some particular article.

Half-unconsciously watching, she saw Sibyl suddenly start and change color, and her agitation was so apparent that fresh interest was given the scene.

Mrs. Williston shaded her face with her hand, and read for some time.

Was the article lengthy, or was she gaining strength through time?

When she raised her head her face was calm and smiling, and an animated conversation at once began.

Ida strove in vain to get a clew to their conversation. She had no scruples against the part she was acting, for they were themselves unacquainted with the meaning of the word honor; but the distance was too great for even one word to reach her, and the motions of their lips were lost by their positions.

Soon, however, Deaf Dan entered the room, and Williston stopped him as he was passing on to his den.

Then the postmaster's fingers moved in the mutes' alphabet.

"Dan, you are brave and bold?"

The half-breed nodded.

"Do you want a piece of work which will bring you in a pocketful of gold?"

Another nod.

"You told me last night that Ida met a man in the gulch?"

The watcher started and then leaned eagerly forward. The conversation was growing terribly interesting. By the position in which he stood, she could see every motion of Williston's hands, and she was herself an adept at the finger language.

"She met Hubert Lowell," the mute's nimble fingers flashed back.

"What did they say?"

"I told you before that I could not get near enough to watch their lips."

"Was their manner lover-like?"

Dan reflected for a moment, and then nodded emphatically. It had never before been his lot to pronounce judgment on such a case, but, remembering that he had seen Lowell stand for half an hour with his arm about Ida's waist, the mute believed he was justified in pronouncing their manner lover-like—decidedly so.

Luckily, Williston did not press his questions in that direction, and he was left partially in doubt. He did not suspect that matters had gone half so far; he believed Lowell and Merritt stood shoulder to shoulder in the race; so he passed lightly over the point where he should have questioned the closest.

"This Lowell is in the way," he continued, in his silent fashion. "I will give you a hundred dollars to effectually remove him."

Deaf Dan's eyes sparkled.

"I'll do it!" he quickly telegraphed.

"Good! Now listen to me. Go to-night to the cabin where Lowell lives. He keeps the door and windows strongly fastened, but there is a hole in the roof, through which he lets out smoke when he has a fire, through which you can enter. It is covered by a flat board, easily removed. Take with you a rope, by which you can gain the roof, and a knife, with which to kill Lowell. Strike sure, and at his heart; dead men tell no tales. Will you do it?"

"I will!" the mute's swift fingers declared.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DEAF DAN SEEKS HIS PREY.

IDA was horrified. Of course she had known before just how desperate a villain Williston was, and there was really nothing surprising in his new scheme, but it was the direction in which the blow was leveled that made it so especially terrible to her.

The murder of Hubert Lowell had been as coolly discussed as though he had been no more than an animal.

At this point, however, a change of position on the part of the trio below prevented her

from following the silent conversation any further, but, a little later, Deaf Dan took from his coat a long-bladed, glittering knife and held it up to view while he ran his finger carelessly along the edge.

The pantomime was so horribly suggestive that Ida grew faint with emotion, and a blurr came before her eyes.

She threw off the feeling, but there was little more to see. Deaf Dan went to his room, and, after a few words between Williston and his wife, the latter ascended the stairs.

Before she reached the upper floor, Ida had time to close the door of her room, and none of the plotters suspected that their interview had been observed.

Ida had received sufficient food for thought to occupy her attention for some time. The life of Hubert Lowell was menaced, and the time set for the murder was but a few hours away. He must be warned before dark, and that, too, by herself.

In so important an affair she could not trust any other person.

She would go out at once and search for him.

Putting on her hat, she carelessly descended to the post-office, but, once there, Williston requested her to remain for half an hour while he went over to the Eagle Hotel.

She was about to decline when her gaze rested upon the paper which Seba had shown his wife. She remembered that he had called Sibyl's attention to a particular paragraph, and that Sibyl had shown emotion.

If Williston went away and left the paper she would have a chance to examine it.

This thought flashed upon her, but without showing her feelings, she agreed to his request.

He went out and she caught up the paper. She knew almost exactly where to look, and almost the first thing she saw was a copy of the article of which Ben Brown had told her—the one asking for information of Egbert Hadley.

No this was what had interested both Williston and his wife!

She had scarcely formed this theory when her gaze fell upon another notice, directly beneath it, which proved to be of equal interest.

"Information wanted of Ida Shelburne, daughter of Israel L. Shelburne and his wife, Marion, nee Miss Taylor, former residents of San Francisco. Miss Shelburne is known to have been at Santa Barbara, in the Spring of 18—. If living, she is informed of the death of her uncle, Andrew J. Taylor, and requested to communicate with the undersigned at once."

Then followed the name and address of a well-known San Francisco lawyer.

Like a flash Ida—for she was the Miss Shelburne, in question—remembered the prophecy of Buckshot Ben that same one had died and left her a fortune, and, not doubting the theory now, it seemed as though he must have supernatural powers.

Another thing was now clear, or, at least, she adopted a correct theory.

The article to which Williston had called his wife's attention was the one concerning Ida Shelburne. He had presented it as confirming a rumor they had before heard; and it was the conviction that there was actually a fortune at stake, that had resolved Seba, working in the interest of Rufus Merritt, to at once remove Hubert Lowell as a possible bar to their scheme.

It was not that, however, which had moved Sibyl so perceptibly. The sight of the notice would have given her no new information; it would merely have confirmed a former belief, and that verification would have caused only pleasure.

She, however, had been considerably agitated—not violently, for it had escaped Williston's notice; but Ida had seen confusion and, she was positive, momentary alarm in her face.

What had been the cause?

Remembering another occasion when Sibyl had shown emotion, Ida easily solved the difficulty. When the paper was extended to her, Sibyl's gaze had rested, first, not on the article which referred to Ida Shelburne, but on the one directly above it—the request for information of Egbert Hadley.

Yes, there could be little doubt about it, and in Ida's mind arose one question—What had the woman been to Hadley?

There were theories easily found to apply to the case, but in the absence of proof, the girl's mind went on to another singular fact.

Certainly, no less than singular was the chance which had placed her own name and that of Egbert Hadley side by side, as it were, in that column where people inquire for the missing and the dead.

Little did the fate-driven girl think, in the old, happy days at Santa Barbara, when she looked forward to a life of happiness with Egbert Hadley, that they would one day figure thus—both inquired after as "missing!"

Her reflections ended abruptly as, glancing through the window, she saw Williston returning abruptly. Instantly the cause of his haste flashed upon her, and she quickly threw down the paper, placing it as nearly as possible in its old position.

The postmaster came in hurriedly. He flashed an anxious glance toward the girl, but she was busy over some piece of work and seemed wholly at her ease; and his face cleared as he lifted the paper and concealed it in his pocket.

His appearance showed that, after suddenly remembering his imprudence in leaving the paper where it might be seen by Ida, he had returned most hastily; but his work at the Eagle Hotel was done and, believing all well, he graciously said that he would then relieve her in the office.

So Ida went out, showing no haste while within sight of the house, but, when once sure she was not followed, going directly to the cabin of Hubert Lowell.

When she returned to Williston's, it was with the knowledge that he would not be taken unawares.

That evening, Rufus Merritt called at the house, brought, Ida shrewdly suspected, by a letter to him written by Sibyl and conveyed by Deaf Dan; and a little strategy on Mrs. Williston's part left the visitor and Ida alone.

As a result he made a formal marriage proposal.

It was a terrible evening for Ida. She kept the advice of Buckshot Ben in her mind and concealed her repugnance, but during no one minute were her thoughts absent from Hubert Lowell. He was menaced by assassins; he might be even then struggling in their hands. No wonder she felt utterly overwhelmed.

Yet somehow she acted her part—a part so loathsome to her upright nature; and Rufus Merritt went away believing he had won a bride; and the wedding-day was to be a week later.

Thus far had she complied with Ben Brown's request. Would he return in time to save her from her fate?

That evening Hubert Lowell retired to his cabin as usual. Forewarned, he was forearmed; and all he asked was that Deaf Dan would attempt to carry out the plot formed by his master.

Two miners who could be trusted had been taken in Lowell's confidence in a measure, and they intended to make the deaf mute disgusted with his work before he was through with it.

Some hours passed on, and the young man, having enjoyed his usual smoke, was, if outside appearances were reliable, fast asleep. He was certainly quiet, but not a sound escaped his notice.

Thus it was that, at midnight, a slight rubbing against the southern end of his hut attracted his attention.

Arising, he peered through the wall and saw a man, or boy, ascending a rope hand over hand. One glance was enough to reveal the half-breed; his slender but sinewy figure was unlike that of any other citizen of the Gulch; and Hubert perceived that he had cast his rope over a projecting board, lasso fashion, and was ascending to the roof.

A grim smile passed over his face. He was willing that Deaf Dan should enter if he wished, but he had his reasons for judging that he would be surprised at his reception.

At last the swaying form disappeared over the roof, and then Lowell heard him crawling toward the orifice through which he intended to enter.

Suddenly there was a grating noise, as though a board had slipped under the prowler, and then a rolling sound, and the miner smiled grimly as he realized that Dan had lost his balance and rolled from the building.

He did not hear him strike the ground, though there was a clatter of boards, mysteriously produced, but it was quite likely that the agile half-breed had managed to alight on his feet.

He waited for signs that he was ascending again, but ten minutes passed in silence.

Thus far, Lowell had watched the hole in the roof, but he was about to take another look through the wall when there came a heavy knock at the door, followed by the calling of his own name in the voice of his allies.

He quickly opened, and then one of the men spoke:

"By ther eternal beeswax! It's ther quarest thing I ever heerd on! Come this way!"

He led the way around the corner of the cabin, and there, swaying slightly in the air, hung Deaf Dan, suspended by the neck by his own rope.

"He slipped an' rolled off ther ruff, an' a kile o' his rope caught him about the neck, an'—wal, thar he is! We thort, at first, he was shammin', but ther critter is stone dead!"

It was true, and all had happened as he said. Once on the roof, Deaf Dan had drawn up the loose end of the rope, so that no one would observe it; and when he slipped and fell, a coil of the rope had in some strange way become twisted about his neck. Consequently, the rope being of just the proper length for the tragedy, he had been executed as neatly as any hangman could have done the work, his neck being broken by the fall.

The body was lowered and, seeing that aid was a thing of the past with the half-breed, they conveyed it to the house of Seba Williston.

It was an unexpected home-coming for the assassin.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANOTHER LINK IN THE CHAIN.

VERY much to the surprise of Lowell, Williston showed no emotion when the body of his servant was laid before him, and the only inference to be drawn was that he considered the half-breed already past his days of usefulness.

He had been his partner in more than one crime, and though he had always served faithfully, it remained a fact that he could tell a good deal more about his master's life than the man of many characters would care to have known.

Deaf Dan was brought to him as a suicide. The miners stated that they had found him hanging by the neck, and Lowell only appeared as a man who had been aroused after the discovery.

Williston must, naturally, have had his own opinion on the suicide question, but he gave no sign and the matter made little talk.

The interment took place in due time, and thus Deaf Dan went off the world's stage forever.

Other days glided past, and the one selected for the wedding of Ida and Rufus Merritt grew steadily near. The girl's anxiety increased accordingly. Buckshot Ben had promised to appear in time to prevent an awkward dilemma, but when Tuesday night fell he had not been seen.

Of course it would be easy enough for Ida to feign illness on the fateful Thursday, but she feared a postponement might in some way work ill to Brown's plans.

Lowell shared her anxiety. It was not very pleasant to him to see preparations being made for the marriage of the woman he loved with another man as the chief male actor in the drama. He heard the approaching affair mentioned wherever he went, and, on the whole, he was in a mood far from peaceful and serene.

On this Tuesday evening, however, as he sat alone in his cabin, there came a knock at the door and he opened it, to see a man in the dress of a Mexican.

"Ah! I am glad to see you, Senor Lowell," said the visitor. "I have business of importance."

"Is it you, Juan? Blessed if I knew you at first. Come in!" said Hubert, as he recognized Ben Brown's ally.

With the door closed they sat down at the table.

"How's Captain Duke and the rest?" asked the host, laughing.

"Hush! don't speak dangerous names here. My hair always rises on end when I work against Captain Duke. All is the same with the band; but I want to find Senor Brown."

"Why, don't you know that he was burned in the American Hotel?"

"I know he was *not*, senor; and I know, too, that if Dan Flower is still alive, so is

Senor Brown. We will not argue over this, but I have something for Senor Brown. He asked me to get a certain letter from the cave for him, and I have secured it. More than that, I have what I believe to be important news for him."

Lowell was puzzled. He knew that Ben had asked Juan to get certain documents—he did not know what—from the cave, and it seemed that Juan had proved faithful; but, would it do to trust the Mexican with important news?

While they sat in silence, another knock sounded at the door. Once more Lowell opened, and this time a tall, black-bearded man appeared; and without a word he pushed past Hubert and stood inside the cabin.

To both the previous occupants he seemed to be a stranger, but he stepped forward toward the table with extended hand.

"Hallo, Juan, how's the cause?" he said.

"Senor Brown!" ejaculated the Mexican, starting from his seat.

"Hush! hush! Keep your seat and remain quiet—just a hair. Hubert, old man, shakel! Have you drank any brandy to-night?"

Buckshot Ben was certainly home again, but his last question so puzzled Lowell that he could barely mutter a negative.

"Lucky you haven't, for I don't believe there is a stomach-pump in Shaker Gulch. Did you suppose the death of Deaf Dan cleared you of all danger? Well, I reckon not; Seba ain't that kind of clown. Take yer brandy-bottle, smash it over a dornick, and sign the pledge straightway—otherwise, you'll get in over your boots some day."

Ben Brown lighted his pipe, elevated his feet on the table, and began smoking placidly.

Lowell was surprised, but he managed to comprehend that the man-hunter was back, and that, in some way, his medicinal reserve-fund had been tampered with by Williston.

"Juan, I heard you say that you had papers for me—my ear was at the door—and if you'll trot them out, I'll take a look at them."

"I shall be delighted, senor," the Mexican declared, and he promptly produced a soiled sheet of writing-paper.

Ben Brown's eyes sparkled at sight of it, for it seemed to be about two-thirds of a half-sheet of "commercial" note paper, but the contents proved far more interesting.

From top to bottom it was covered with bold, regular writing which, though slightly blurred in places, was still legible.

And this is what Ben Brown read:

"I, the undersigned, a miner of Cactus Creek, commonly known as Placer Pete, write these lines as my last on earth. I am tired of life, and, to-night I will take my departure from an unfriendly world. I am aware that it is a cowardly act for a man to take his own life, and I suppose it is a sin; but I have not lived such a life as has made me a useful man in the world. I hope the boys of Cactus Creek will not forget me, for I have a strong friendship for all. My real name is Egbert Hadley, and my residence, when I had one, was at Stockton, California. I hope my fellow-miners will notify the authorities of said Stockton of my death, and not forget me too soon."

Here the letter ended abruptly, but it was pretty certain that it would be complete if that part was in existence which had so strangely come to Ida's hands; the name only was needed—the name of Egbert Hadley.

Ben Brown turned to Juan.

"How did you manage to get this document?" he asked.

"It was easy enough when the man who carried it returned from an expedition to the south. His name is Tom Barnes. At the time I secured the first piece—that on which I wrote a note to the senorita—I took the letter from Barnes's coat, and replaced what I did not use. By the time I knew you wanted this part, Barnes had gone south. When he came back, all was well."

"I see; but what about this letter? What does it mean?"

"Barnes will tell you all if you promise not to harm him."

"I'll do that; I'll swear he shall go entirely free if he makes a clean breast of it, for he was but a tool in the hands of others. Let him give his testimony against his employers and all will be well."

"Excellent, senor. Well, Barnes went South with parties whose names are—"

"Wait a hair. I know their names, so we will not even whisper them here. Where did they go, what did they do, and what about this letter?"

"They went to Cactus Creek and murdered the man called Placer Pete. The leader of the

assassins gave this letter to Barnes and said: 'Put this in his pocket.' Barnes had to wait a little before obeying the order, and in the meanwhile he put the letter in his own pocket. Anon, he believed he transferred it to that of Placer Pete, but when he reached the cave again he found the letter still in his own possession."

"Well, what is his inference?"

"He believes that when it was handed to him, another was accidentally passed along with it; and that when he put the one in Placer Pete's pocket, the other was retained unknown to him."

"Exactly. A mistake, as I have always believed. Instead of the forged dying statement, an ordinary letter was placed in Placer Pete's pocket; the one written to John Marble from 'Eagle Eye.' Well, Juan, let Barnes come forward and tell his story and I'll keep my promise. What of yourself?"

"Caramba! when this matter is settled, I shall bend my steps toward Mexico on the run. I fear the knives of Captain Duke and the band."

"Duke is not likely to do you harm. He is, at present, closely shadowed by keen men, and before many days he will find his head in a noose."

After some further talk the Mexican took his departure and Brown and Lowell were alone. The latter could scarcely credit the fact that the long-bearded, dark-faced man before him was his friend; again had the man-hunter proved his tact at disguising himself.

Lowell briefly stated the situation of affairs at the Gulch.

"We must notify Ida and let matters go on to the wedding-day," said Ben. "Then we'll bring up the grand climax."

"Isn't there danger that the enemy will take the alarm and flee?"

"Not a hair. Officers of law are now in Shaker Gulch and all of our men are shadowed. No one can leave."

"Have you all the evidence you want?"

"The statement of Tom Barnes will furnish the last link. I know already just what he will tell, but his story will be proof where I can give positive circumstantial evidence."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A PRACTICAL SPECTER.

THE day appointed for the wedding of Ida Shelburne and Rufus Merritt arrived and found the conspirators in the best of spirits, for as closely as they were watched, they did not suspect the fact.

With the supposed death of Ben Brown their only imminent danger had been laid, and though a long series of crimes in the past left them in a mood far from easy, they saw no cloud on the horizon.

Seba Williston was happy because he had secured a handsome wife, because he stood higher than ever in the esteem of the men of Shaker Gulch, and because his experiments as Captain Duke were still prospering.

One thing, only, worried him. Twice he had attempted the life of Hubert Lowell, but the young man had escaped knife and poison.

Rufus Merritt was in high glee because he was about to become the husband of a young lady who had a neat little fortune on the other side of the Sierra Nevada, and his heart was light on this, his wedding day.

Two hours before the time appointed for the bridal, Julian Parsons was seated alone in his room. His face bore a thoughtful look, for, with him, success was not yet fully achieved.

In the midst of his meditations he was aroused by a knock at the door, and, a moment later, Sibyl Williston entered. With the door once more closed, they greeted each other with an embrace and a kiss—something which would have astonished Seba, had he chanced to be an observer.

"I am glad to see you, dear," said Parsons, with a tenderness which seemed real. "I feared you were not coming."

"Still, I am here, with you, and that is happiness for me. I could not come before, for I was helping Ida. The little fool! I would rather strangle her, but Rufus has been faithful to us and we must now help him."

The fair Sibyl showed a remarkable tact for changing from a cooing dove to a hissing viper.

"Rufe will soon be all right, but what of us?" Parsons asked.

She looked into his face with her dark eyes sparkling.

"Fate will not long keep us apart, dear. We will defy everything and join our fortunes forever. We have played a bold game, but every move has been a success; and now only one more stroke is needed to fix us for life."

"When Seba Williston walks off the stage, the drama ends and the curtain falls on our triumph," he added, laughing.

"Ay, and it won't be a great time away. Seba is a man of middle age, and it would not be strange if he was to die suddenly. Post-mortem examinations are unknown to Shaker Gulch, and if we say 'apoplexy,' no one would arise to whisper 'poison' in the coroner's ear."

"Correct, my dear, correct. In a few days you shall be a widow, and with an immense fortune at our disposal, we can at last go before a minister and join our fortunes for life. By the way, have you yet secured a look at Williston's private papers?"

"No. I have not been able to find any."

"They may be deposited in a bank somewhere. At any rate, I am convinced that he has immense wealth somewhere. It's about time for you to begin to pump him quietly. Learn what you can of his life before coming to Shaker Gulch."

"I'll do my best, though the old fool is very close-mouthed," replied the affectionate wife.

Parsons laughed, and then arose and went to his trunk. Unlocking it, he took out a stout canvas bag, which was about six inches square, and contained something which jingled as he moved.

"Here," he said, "is all that remains of the money we ourselves made. I trust we shall not be obliged to engage in the business again, but these yellow-boys ought not to be lost."

He ran his hand into the bag, and lifting a number of what seemed to be golden coins, of five and ten dollar denominations, allowed them to fall back into the bag. As he had said, they were of private manufacture, but the imitation was good.

"Can you exchange a hundred dollars' worth of these for genuine ones from Williston's stock, taking your time to do it?" he asked.

"Certainly; it won't be my first attempt," said Sibyl, smiling.

"Very good. I'll now proceed to divide them equally between Merritt and ourselves."

He moved his chair to the table beside which the woman sat, and pouring out the coins, divided them into two piles, according to their fictitious value.

One half he then returned to the bag, and pushing the other toward Sibyl, he said:

"Take those, if you will, and replace them with the genuine article. If Williston proves to be long-lived, we may need them yet."

"Just a hair!"

The words, uttered in a deep, resonant voice, arose from behind Parsons, and he sprang up from his chair and wheeled like a flash.

The voice, the peculiarly-chosen words—all were like a well-known and menacing epoch of the past.

What he saw did not serve to reassure him. In the window, half within the room and half without, Ben Brown sat regarding them with his old, quiet smile. One look at his vigorous face, his muscular body, and his half-presented revolver was enough to show that he was a creature of flesh and blood; and yet these two schemers had believed his bones lying in the ruins of the burned hotel.

Consternation seized upon both and they seemed turned to stone. Sibyl had grown deathly pale, for, in the first shock of her terror, she had not a doubt but that she saw the specter of the man-hunter, and never before had she been so frightened.

Parsons was equally moved, but he saw the matter only in its true, practical, menacing light.

"I say, old man," remarked Buckshot Ben, "I've come to see that you divide the bogus money fair!"

His voice broke the spell and Parsons took one step toward where his revolver lay on the mantel-piece, but Brown quickly gained an upright position, presented his own revolver and spoke in a sharp voice.

"Hold up, there, you galeot. Don't try to reach your shooter or you'll get into trouble. Cast your eyes around this shanty and you'll see that luck is dead against you."

The unwavering revolver obliged Parsons to obey the first order, and he mechanically complied with the second.

There was, indeed, something to see, for

other men were now visible—they had appeared at both windows—and as the lull came they began to pour in freely.

A cold sweat broke out on Julian Parsons's body. He knew not just how deep was the danger menacing him, but the fact that Ben Brown was alive and at the head of these men was enough to show him visions of downfall and misfortune. Sibyl suddenly recovered from her terror; she saw that the first comer was no specter but Ben Brown in the flesh; and, with a return of her color, she began to slide from her chair with a pantherish movement.

"Keep your seat, marm, and don't get weary," said the man-hunter. "Any attempt to resist might make trouble."

"What does this intrusion mean?" demanded Parsons, finding his tongue at last.

"It means that your career is over, Julian Parsons, John Marble, Panther Joe, or whatever you see fit to call yourself. I am a detective of Denver, and I arrest you for the crime of counterfeiting!"

It was one of the new-comers who spoke, and as he finished, he showed his badge of office.

"That's the case, to a hair," added Buckshot Ben.

Much to their surprise, Parsons calmly folded his arms across his chest.

"I surrender?" he simply said.

"He is innocent! I swear it!" cried Sibyl, starting from her chair and addressing the Denver detective, in a wild voice.

"So, of course, are you, madam," the official coldly replied. "The bag of counterfeit coins on the table, which Parsons bade you exchange for genuine ones, proves you both guiltless!"

"Just a hair," said Brown, who was examining the coins.

In doing this he took his keen eyes off the prisoners, and the officers permitted Sibyl to approach Parsons.

Before they suspected her purpose she had passed him a revolver which she had produced from the folds of her dress. What she expected him to do is uncertain, but he at once turned the muzzle upon Buckshot Ben.

There was a flash and a report, and the man-hunter fell flat. His apparent injury was a surprise, for one of the officers had turned the muzzle of the weapon; but Ben came up smiling.

At the last moment he had seen the intended murderer's position, and having no time to draw his own revolver, he had adopted the unusual artifice to save himself.

A wild cry from Sibyl banished his smile and announced some new misfortune.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

BUCKSHOT BEN APPEARS AT THE WEDDING.

SIBYL'S cry had not been without a reason, for Parsons had sunk back in the officer's arms and all saw the blood gushing out over his vest. Coming from so near the heart, it was plain that it was no small injury, and as they laid him down they expected to see him breathe his last at once.

Meanwhile, Sibyl had been screaming wildly, but her cries suddenly ceased and she dropped to the floor.

She had swooned for the second time in her life.

All of these border officers were accustomed to wild scenes and they did not lose their coolness, but it was Buckshot Ben who at once came to the front.

The hour appointed for the wedding was at hand, and it would not do to delay. Sibyl, of course, was expected to be there, but it was not likely they would wait for her.

Accordingly, by Ben's directions, Parsons was placed in bed and left with a physician, who gave him twenty-four hours to live, and Sibyl was turned over to the landlady and one officer.

Then Brown and four stout assistants hurried toward Williston's. They had promised Ida to be present at her wedding.

Perhaps five minutes had elapsed after their departure, when a lady, closely veiled, and evidently greatly excited, appeared in the hotel, and accosted the officer who had been stationed to keep away intruders.

"I want to see the man who was shot—Parsons!" she said, in a husky voice.

"Sorry to refuse you, madam, but it's impossible," replied the detective. "The man is too low to see any one."

"But I come from Mr. Brown!"

"From Brown? Well, perhaps—Pardon me, but I cannot consider a request from a veiled lady."

She raised her veil, revealing a face pale, thin, and sad, but so full of apparent honor that the officer was convinced.

"I'll see the physician," he said at once.

And, as a result, the veiled lady went in to see Julian Parsons.

In the meanwhile Ben Brown and his friends had arrived at Williston's. They were just in time.

Tired of waiting for Sibyl, Merritt was urging that the ceremony go on; and, as Ida caught sight of the man-hunter's face in the crowd, she at once stepped forward and gave her hand to Rufus.

She had plenty of friends there; Lowell and Ned Barton were on the ground in disguise, Brown was at hand, and the minister was an honest man; she need have no fear for the result.

They took their places before the minister, with Seba Williston close at hand, and in a moment more the ceremony would have been begun.

Just then, however, the reverend gentleman saw a handsome, bearded miner push forward and extend one hand toward the would-be bridegroom.

"Mr. Parson," said Buckshot Ben, "I reckon this wedding is 'off'; this man is wanted for high crimes and misdemeanors."

A hush followed, and Merritt cowered before the accusing finger, but bold Seba Williston did not long remain unmoved.

He recognized his deadly enemy, and, like a flash, out came his revolver. Whatever the consequences might be, he was resolved to shoot him then and there.

The result was a surprise to him. Once again there was occasion for Buckshot Ben to show that wonderful agility he possessed, and with a leap so quick and accurate that none would have believed it possible, he sprang upon the postmaster and bore him to the floor.

"Hold hard, Seba, old man!" he said, as quietly as ever. "This is a happy occasion and we don't want a scene—not a hair!"

Just then a pair of handcuffs clicked over the prisoner's wrists and his downfall was complete.

A few feet away stood Merritt, in as bad a plight.

A majority of the lookers-on had expected all this, but some of the uninitiated began to growl and the open-mouthed minister faintly asked:

"What does this scene mean, gentlemen?"

"It means that these galoots have got in over their boots," said Ben Brown, coolly.

"It means that Seba Williston, your model postmaster, is a prisoner in the hands of the law. Why? I'll tell you why. Because he has robbed the mails; because he was until recently a road-agent in California, where he was called El Cuchillo; because he is at present at the head of a gang who rob stages, railroad trains and the like, among which gang he is known as Captain Duke; because he shot my pard, Santa Barbara Saul, in cold blood, and for dozens of other murders. For all these things he is wanted and the proof is irrefragable."

The sweeping charge fell like a thunderbolt on the good minister and those who had believed in Seba. Had the heavens fallen, it would have been a small matter compared to the fall of their great man—the loftiest monument of respectability of which Shaker Gulch had ever been able to boast.

The gleaming badges of the detectives proved all, however.

"But—but—but," stammered the minister, catching at a straw, "this young man, Mr. Merritt, who was about to be married; surely he has done no wrong!"

"I'm sorry to say he has—just a hair! He is Lightning Sam, counterfeiter, gambler, swindler at large and assassin."

"The last is false!" cried Merritt, shrilly.

"Tell that to Placer Pete!" said the man-hunter, with cool sarcasm.

The shot went home, and, without another word, Merritt submitted to his fate.

Together with Williston, he was taken in charge by the officers; and then Ben Brown told the story of Egbert Hadley to Ida, Lowell being a listener at her request.

"Poor Hadley!" said Ben, with real feeling. "He was a young man who was at once wealthy, honorable and noble of character,

well liked by all and happy, until he married Estelle Montford. She changed his happiness into misery, for she was all that was vile. I will not dwell on their unhappy married life; suffice it to say she finally left her home and became a mere adventuress.

"That home was in Stockton, California, but Hadley did not long remain there after she left. He, too, wandered away, and, at Santa Barbara, met you, Miss Ida. I believe he loved you sincerely, but, knowing he had a wife living, he was at times moody and was too honorable to speak to you of marriage, though he could not control his heart. Why he did not move for a divorce is uncertain. Perhaps he sensitively dreaded the disgrace it would bring on his name, but I shall always believe he was not wholly of sound mind at any time after he left Stockton. At any rate he left Santa Barbara, and we have no further trace of him until he appeared at Cactus Creek, calling himself Placer Pete.

"In the meanwhile his wife had assumed the name of Sibyl Roswell and linked her fortunes with those of Julian Parsons. The latter person, with his friend Merritt, lived as a counterfeiter, gambler and sharper, but they soon thought they saw the road to an independent fortune.

"They got their eyes on Seba Williston, and thinking him a man of colossal wealth, it was planned that Sibyl should marry him, after which he was to be put out of the way and Sibyl was to marry Parsons.

"In the way of this plan stood Egbert Hadley, the lawful husband of Sibyl. The plotters resolved to remove him; so Parsons and Merritt, with one Tom Barnes for a guide, set out for Cactus Creek, where they knew Hadley to be, calling himself Placer Pete.

"Now, they wished it to be known in Stockton that Hadley was dead, and to have it seem that he committed suicide, so that Sibyl, as his wife, could claim the property. In accordance with this idea Parsons forged a letter, purporting to have been written by Hadley just before his death—and the three men journeyed to Cactus Creek.

"Placer Pete was found dead in his bed with signs to show that he suicided. Was that so? No; it was the cunning plot of the assassins. He was killed outside the village and brought to the cabin on a blanket. The latter article was used so that no blood would drip on the stones by the way, and to prevent footprints the assassins wore moccasins.

"They thought they placed on his body the forged letter stating that he killed himself, but by a mistake an ordinary letter was left. Perhaps I should say an extraordinary letter, for it was an enigmatical one written by Merritt from Denver to Parsons at Shaker Gulch. It was addressed to 'John Marble,' and signed 'Eagle Eye.'

"Then the plotters waited for news from Stockton that Egbert Hadley had suicided at Cactus Creek, but through their failure to leave the proper letter 'Placer Pete' was buried as an unknown.

"Having become interested in the case, I came here to the Gulch to find John Marble, but the name being a fictitious one, I was for a while at fault. Merritt, however, kindly placed a clew in my hands. Being jealous of Lowell, he wrote him an anonymous letter of warning. I saw it, and recognized the writing of 'Eagle Eye,' and after some time I trapped Merritt into writing a letter to Miss Ida, which betrayed him.

"Clew after clew has slowly come to my hands, and with the confession of Tom Barnes the last mystery is made plain."

CHAPTER XL.

A FINAL REVELATION.

BOTH Ida and Lowell were loud in their praises when Buckshot Ben had explained his course at Shaker Gulch more fully, but he merely smiled at their words.

"If you want to know people's secrets," he said, explanatorily, "mark their conduct before the footlights and guess at that behind the scenes. Many a fair movement covers a dark purpose, therefore, when you see a movement of a suspicious party, study his motive. There is a reason for all things, and a succession of links may be arranged in a chain."

"You have already proved your theory," said Ida.

"Just a hair," he said, with his old, quiet manner,

At this point a messenger came to summon him to the bedside of Julian Parsons, who was said to be fast sinking.

He went, and once at the hotel was informed that Parsons had but little time to live, and that he said he had a confession to make before he died.

"I'll go in," the ex-man-hunter said. "Very likely he has decided that he is in over his boots and wishes to make a confession. How's Sibyl?"

"The doctor states that she goes from one fainting fit to another, and he says her condition is serious."

"Sin is a pleasant companion for a while," said another officer, "but it is fickle as a friend, and when it goes back on a man it hits hard."

"There has been a lady in to see Parsons," said the previous speaker.

"A lady!" said Ben, astonished. "Who was she?"

"I don't know; she said she came from you."

"A trick, by Judas! Look well to your prisoners, and send out to have that strange woman arrested."

"That is not necessary. She is in a room of the hotel, and she says she wishes to see you after your interview with Parsons."

Ben Brown stared for a moment in surprise, then the expression of his face changed and he staggered back against the wall. He put out one hand as though feeling his way in darkness, and his sudden pallor so alarmed the detective that he sprang to his assistance.

By a great effort, however, the miner rallied. No man had seen him so much moved for years. He crushed back his weakness and simply said:

"It shall be so!"

Then he went on to Parsons's room.

Life indeed was fast ebbing with the wretched man who had made a friend of sin only to be stung at last by the fangs of the serpent he had made a bedfellow.

He requested that he might be left alone with Buckshot Ben, and when it was thus arranged, the two men looked each other in the face.

"Arthur Moulton!" whispered the dying man.

He whom we have known as Ben Brown started, his features moved strangely, and then he folded his arms with the old, composed air.

"I am Arthur Moulton," he simply said.

"I did not know it until to-day," continued Parsons, "and yet I ought to have done so. When, ten years ago, you married Ethel Basington, you secured the woman that I, Charles Temple, had loved. Very likely you never heard my name, but I can tell of my work—my horrible work."

"I had no cause to blame you, or your wife, but I swore to ruin you both. I did so. You were then young and hot-tempered, and you know what cunning proofs I presented to connect your wife with the noted forger queen of San Francisco. Partially convinced, there was trouble between you, but I saw that the affair would blow over. What did I then do? Demon that I was, I contrived it so that your innocent wife was tried and sentenced for five years as the forger queen. Yes, she was innocent; I swear it; but I have hid my guilty secret until to-day. She, however, has been here, and as my one good act on earth, I made this confession."

Not a bitter word escaped the listener's lips. He was terribly pale, but very calm. Like the Roman father, he may have said to himself: "I will be patient; oh, so patient!" but he would not raise his voice against this wretch on the threshold of the eternal world.

"I will go to her," he simply said, knowing well who was the strange lady who awaited him, and knowing well, too, the identity of Billy Blanket and the Indian girl of Whip Canyon.

At the door of that room he paused for a moment. Nearly ten years had passed since he had knowingly looked on that wronged wife. Their old married life came vividly back to him. The happiness, followed by doubt, misery, and her arrest and sentence—all!

Convinced at last, he had left her to her fate in the prison walls, and becoming "Ben Brown," had gone out on the face of the earth as a wanderer.

After the pause he slowly opened the door and went in to meet the pale but still hand-

some lady who so agitatedly arose to receive him.

That interview, too sacred for even our presence, need not be described here. Suffice it to say, they were out of the darkness, and they met in a marvelous light.

And when Ethel told of her long search for her husband, after emerging from her prison room, her course as Billy Blanket was plain. She had chanced upon Charles Temple, *alias* Julian Parsons before she knew that her husband was also near. The attack on Lowell in the gulch was intended for Parsons. Driven almost mad, she had tried to slay the man who had ruined her life, but she afterward became calmer.

The keen eyes of Arthur Moulton had never recognized her because he saw her, as chance would have it, only at night; but Ida, with a woman's penetration, had guessed her sex from her voice and, it will be remembered, had said to the supposed Billy Blanket: "I know your secret."

As a result she had been told all which will explain much that was mysterious to Ben Brown. Ethel desired to make Parsons confess before she revealed her identity, so when Ida used her influence to prevent a duel between Parsons and Brown, she could not say to the latter: "I have done this at the request of Billy Blanket."

But Time, that great physician, had removed the sting from more than one old wound, and it only required a further lease of life to wholly heal the ragged edges.

What story ends without a tragedy? Not one, if all is told, for life itself is full of tragedy. If the pages of a book are soiled with bloodshed, what of the scenes which daily occur around us?

In concluding our story, it is necessary to tell how the indignant miners arose in force, led by Judge Lynch, and hanged Seba Williston; and we must tell, too, that the wretched Sibyl, never recovering from her shock, was buried in the same grave with Julian Parsons; how, of all the plotters, only Meritt was saved to the law, that dealt with him swiftly, silently, conclusively.

An attempt to seize "Captain Duke's" band was frustrated by their speedy flight; but Juan Lopez wrote to "Senor Brown" from Mexico that all was well with him, and that he should deal no more with crime.

The leader's small fortune, secure while flourishing as "El Cuchillo," lacking known owners, went to improve Shaker Gulch.

Ida became the wife of Hubert Lowell, and the fortune left her by her deceased uncle was soon increased four-fold by Lowell's shrewd but upright business tact; and we need only add that they are happy.

Lowell knows his wife does not entirely forget Egbert Hadley, but he is not jealous of the dead man who was more unfortunate than sinning. Ida remembers the Santa Barbara romance with chastened sadness. As much trouble as it brought her, she feels no bitterness toward him whose life was wrecked by circumstances beyond his control.

Under the soil of Arizona still lie the remains of a man whose murder has been fully avenged; in his narrow bed, Placer Pete sleeps well.

And what of Buckshot Ben?

In one of the fairest valleys of California, there is a home where all is peace and happiness. There the ex-man-hunter lives with his wife, who seems to grow young daily; and, as he looks out on the broad acres of which he is master, if any one was to inquire if a single, small cloud lingers on the sky of his later life, Ben Brown would probably answer:

"Not a hair!"

THE END.

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